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Certain Writers and Thinkers

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BY

MARION HARLAND

AUTHOR OF "SOME COLONIAL HOMESTEADS AND THEIR STORIES," "WHERE GHOSTS WALK," ETC.

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PREFATORY AND DEDICATORY

THESE studies of the characters and home-lives of certain people famous in the judgment of the public, have to do with what they *were*, rather than with what they did. I have essayed no critical analysis of the works that won renown for them. Believing that every human life is a complete story in itself, full of movement and interest, I have tried to disentangle the personal element from the network in which circumstance involved it, and to tempt my reader to regard the man or woman as a fellow-being, rather than as an abstract product of the times in which he or she lived and wrought.

I have an hereditary right to the more than friendly interest I feel in William Cowper. One hundred years ago, save one, my maternal grandmother, a woman of rare culture and fine literary taste, in

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tender compliment to her favourite poet, changed to "Olney" the Indian name of the Virginia homestead to which she was taken as a bride. Cowper's death, in 1800, produced a profound sensation among his admirers on this side of the Atlantic. Every turn in his sorrowful pathway was almost as familiar in the reading circles of America as in England. As a child, I heard him talked of as if he had lived and written and suffered upon the adjoining plantation to the Virginia Olney. The first bit of sacred verse I committed to memory was learned from a well-thumbed copy of *Olney Hymns*, once the property of my sainted grandmother. At ten years of age I knew by heart whole pages of *The Task*, and dozens of Cowper's shorter poems, incited to the undertaking by stories of that blessèd woman's fondness for the gentle poet's writings. I learned to love him before I really comprehended who and what he was, also to associate his name with that of the ancestress who died long before I was born.

It seems, then, good in my eyes, and not a sentimental fantasy, that this loving study of William Cowper as man and friend

should be dedicated to the sweet memory of the gracious gentlewoman from whom, as I like to believe, I have inherited my love of letters, and whatever talent for story-making and story-telling I may possess.

Among those to whom I am indebted for assistance in the preparation of this work I name with pleasure Rev. J. P. Langley, Vicar of Olney, now resident in the Vicarage once tenanted by John Newton ; Mr. Thomas Wright of Olney, the best living authority upon all that pertains to the life and writings of William Cowper, and Beverly Chew, Esq., of New York, who has courteously placed at my disposal certain rare and valuable prints used in illustrating these pages.

MARION HARLAND.

SUNNYBANK, POMPTON, N. J.

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WILLIAM COWPER

WILLIAM COWPER

CHAPTER I

BIRTH AND INFANCY—HIS MOTHER'S DEATH

THE Reverend John Cowper, D.D., Rector of the Parish of Great Birkhampstead in Hertfordshire, England, was not a young man when his wife died, November 13, 1737.

Scanty as are the fragments of her personal history that have drifted to us—distant over a century and a half from the date of her son William's birth,—they enable us to fashion a pleasing, and what is probably a tolerably faithful, portrait of her character and habits. Anne Cowper, the daughter of Roger Donne, Esq., of Ludham Hall in the county of Norfolk, was a gentlewoman ingrain. She had royal blood in her veins, claiming descent from Henry III.

through more than one branch of her family. A more immediate ancestor was "that late learnèd and Reverend Divine, John Donne, Dr. in Divinity, & Deane of S. Paul's, London," the eccentric poet eulogised by Izaak Walton. Believers in inalienable heredity will lay hold of this circumstance as an interesting link in a nobler than regal succession, even the transmission of holy fire from soul to soul. Of this significant relationship, whose bearing upon the destiny of the subject of our biography has been strangely overlooked by the writers of the many Lives of William Cowper, I shall speak more at length in subsequent chapters.

Three children were born to Dr. and Mrs. Cowper within two years after their marriage, a son who was born and died in 1729, and twins, a boy and a girl, born in the following year, neither of whom lived more than a few days. On November 26, 1731, the cry of another new-born baby broke the silence of the Rectory. A fortnight and three days later, "William, the son of John Cowper, D.D., rector of this Parish and Anne his wife, was baptised" in the old church. A second daughter and a

fourth son, born in 1733, and 1734 did not survive the first half-year of their lives.

William Cowper was, then, for the greater part of the years lying between his birth and that of his brother John, who entered the world in 1737, the only nursling in the oft-smitten household. He was within two days of his sixth birthday and Baby John was but a week old when they were left motherless.

The fragile, high-born wife of the Birkhampstead Rector died "with all her music in her," so far as verbal or written utterance went. But, besides the mysterious and unconscious influence flowing from the mother-mind and disposition into the sensitive thing to be born of her soul as of her body, Mrs. Cowper left indestructible traces of her personality upon her boy's character as in his memory.

By a stroke here, and a touch there, a dash of high lights deepening the sombre background, the son sketches for us the picture of the bright, brief years during which they belonged to one another.

"I can truly say," he wrote when she had lain for fifty years in the chancel of her husband's church, "that not a week passes

(perhaps I might with equal veracity say a day) in which I do not think of her. Such was the impression her tenderness made upon me, 'though the opportunity she had for showing it was so short."

His lines *On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture* (which we wonder was not given to him before he was a grey-haired, broken man of fifty-six) are too well known to need repetition here. He had not forgotten one feature of that lovely Long Ago. His mother kept him much with her, and very close to her, contrary to the custom of higher-class English mothers with their young children. Instead of the nursery in the topmost storey of the well-appointed Rectory, and the oversight and companionship of a respectable middle-aged nurse, we have a view of the mother in her dressing-room, and the little fellow, already wise beyond his years, and made "old-fashioned" by the lack of companions of his own age, seated upon a stool at her feet, nestling in the folds of her gown.

"When playing with thy vesture's tissued flowers,
The violet, the pink and jessamine,
I pricked them into paper with a pin,—
And thou wast happier than myself the while,
Wouldst softly speak, and stroke my head and smile."

COWPER'S MOTHER

(FROM A MINIATURE)

The smile that approved his skill in tracing the pattern, the loving passage of her hand over his hair, the patient hearing of his prattle—are lifelike and exquisitely rendered. Never too busy to heed what he was doing, never so preoccupied by her own musings and talks that she could not spare a thought for the solitary survivor of her six babies,—she grew more tenderly solicitous with the nearing of the time when there would be another claimant upon mother-love and motherly offices :

" Thy nightly visits to my chamber made,
That thou mightest know me safe and warmly laid ;
Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,
The biscuit, or confectionery plum,
All this, and more endearing still than all,
Thy constant flow of love that knew no fall ; "

—are some of the "high lights" alluded to just now.

Gently and gradually he was prepared for the coming change. Her own hands would wrap him in the scarlet cloak, and settle upon his sunny head the velvet cap that arrayed him for his first day at school. Other mothers' eyes moisten in contemplating the group at the Rectory door. The small, delicately featured face of the

child, alight with gleeful pride in the "bauble coach" built for his express use; the yearning smile, more sad than tears, in the sweet eyes bent downward upon her boy, as both bade farewell to the babyhood he left behind in his trial-trip into the wide, cold world; the "Gardener Robin," delegated to draw the young master to "the dame-school," consequential in the sense of the trust reposed in him;—there is nothing more common than the scene in our changeful, working-day world, and not many things more beautiful.

Day after day, the little equipage was drawn along the public road to the school where the Rector's son was a personage of distinction; each afternoon home-coming was an event to the pupil, elate with tales of his new associates and of lessons that were never a labour, and sure of the sympathy of his confidante. By what system of time-keeping the mother told off the slow-footed days in her calendar, those can divine who, like her, have waited with what patience faith and hope can lend, for what may bring added wealth of happiness, or the blank end of earthly expectation and desire.

Was it upon his return from school in the twilight of an English November day that William Cowper was told he had a little brother called for their father,—John? And how, after the week of banishment from his mother's room, was the news broken to him—and was it suddenly or tactfully—that his mother was dead? As a clergyman's son, he knew already what death meant. In the anguish of his unchildlike grief, he was, it would seem, left to the care of servants, and they, however sincerely compassionate of the lonely little fellow, had the fondness of their guild for the ghoulish details of "an affliction in the family." The boy, always abnormally sensitive, and now stricken to his heart's core and shuddering in the arctic night that had swallowed up his summer, was led to the nursery window to see the coffin lifted into the hearse, and the hearse driven away to the churchyard. The strokes of the tolling bell, keeping time to the measured crunch of the horses' hoofs upon the gravel, and the horrid rumble of the mourning coaches, unlike any other sound known to conventional civilisation, —were as distinct in the son's ears, after

the lapse of five decades, as on that "burial-day."

The passion of weeping that succeeded the hysterical "long, long sigh" with which the child rushed away from the window probably saved his reason. The maids,—we hear nothing of other comforters,—alarmed by the excess of his sorrow, cheated him by prophecies of his mother's return "to-morrow," if he would be good and patient. A commonplace child would have seen through the flimsy deception. The grey-haired poet explains, as simply as if still a boy of six, that his credence of the servants' tale was born of his agonised longing—the strong necessity of having his mother back again—the utter impossibility of living without her. The pitying ruse was a prolonged strain upon young nerves and strength.

> "By expectation everyday beguiled,
> *Dupe of To-morrow, even from a child!*
> Thus many a sad To-morrow came and went,
> Till, all my stock of infant sorrows spent,
> I learned at last submission to my lot,
> But, 'though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot."

Sorrow and the burial-day: the missing, the longing, false hopes, and despair, were

bitten into his soul by the slow corrosion of the many sad To-morrows.

Celibate cynics sneer at this, our day, as "the Children's Age." That we have gained immeasurably in common humanity upon that of five generations ago, is manifest in the indignant inquiry of the least sentimental reader of the piteous tale before us, as to the whereabouts, and doings, and feelings of the Reverend John Cowper, D.D., while the cruel trick was practised upon his son.

The Rector of Great Birkhampstead "came of the Whig nobility of the robe." Spencer Cowper, his father, was a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, eminent for learning and personal attractions. Sir William Cowper, uncle of the Reverend John, and for whom our poet was named, was Lord Chancellor in the reign of Queen Anne and in that of her successor, George I. Spencer Cowper's choice of the Church for his second son was not guided by appreciation of especial fitness in John for the profession.

Professor Goldwin Smith says of the religion of John Cowper's times :

"The Church was little better than a political force,

cultivated and manipulated by political leaders for their own purposes. The Bishops were either politicians or theological polemics, collecting trophies of victory over free-thinkers as titles to higher preferment. The inferior clergy, as a body, were far nearer in character to Trulliber than to Dr. Primrose ; coarse, sordid, neglectful of their duties, shamelessly addicted to sinecurism and pluralities, fanatics in their Toryism and in attachment to their corporate privileges, cold, rationalistic in their preachings, if they preached at all."

Without accepting this composite photograph as a presentment of the incumbent of Birkhampstead, we extract from the insight thus gained into the temper and practice of his generation some drops of tolerant oil to be applied to our further consideration of his treatment of the motherless child.

William Cowper's picture of the boarding-school boy in *Tirocinium* has a reminiscence of his early home-life in the pleading with a father not to

> " hire a lodging in a house unknown
> For one whose tenderest thoughts all hover round your own."

The reference to the home-bred lad who

> " takes, with fearless ease,
> His favourite stand between his father's knees,"

introduces a shadowy possible figure of the Reverend John into the pretty domestic scene of the mother's dressing-room. And what more natural, we reason, than that their great common sorrow may have drawn out the "tenderest thoughts" of each for the other, when father and son were left without other society in the desolate Rectory, made more desolate by the wail of the hapless baby who was the price of the mother's life? If, in such favouring circumstances, the intercourse of the two ever approximated the sweet familiarity of "chumship" that has been the salvation of many a motherless boy and the solace of many a widower, the blessed season was very short.

CHAPTER II

LIFE OF A SCHOOL FAG—WESTMINSTER AND BRIGHTER DAYS

MR. GOLDWIN SMITH'S *Cowper* belongs to the *English Men of Letters Series*, and has to do with the writer of essays, poems, and translations, rather than with the individual man. Yet the great, warm heart of the able scholar speaks in a sentence which strikes the colour out of our dream-pictures, and raises the curtain upon a long act of brutal realism, fraught with tragical consequences:

"At six years of age this little mass of timid and quivering sensibility was, in accordance with the cruel custom of the time, sent to a large boarding-school.

"The change from home to a boarding-school is bad enough now; it was worse in those days."

How much worse, it is hard for the Ameri-

can reader of any age to comprehend, even with the help of writers like Miss Edgeworth and Dickens. In Maria Edgeworth's *Moral Tales* we have the story of a fag who was sent, shivering, on bitter winter nights, through a dormitory containing twenty beds, to warm each for his luxurious masters by lying between the sheets until his body had taken off the chill. The wretched human warming-pan performed his duty nightly until released by the return of warmer weather.

Sweet Anne Cowper could never have contemplated the banishment of her darling to such a region, or she would not have indulged him and herself in a course of petting which was the worst possible preparation for a fag's life. "I had hardships of different kinds to conflict with, which I felt more sensibly in proportion to the tenderness with which I had been treated at home," is the sufferer's own story of this time.

In rude contrast to his mother's watchful love, Robin's proud protection, and the maids' fond, if injudicious spoiling, was the lot of the youngest boy—a "mother's boy," at that—hurled into the midst of a

pack of nascent tyrants. He was the sport of all, the slave of one. A fifteen-year-old cub chose him as his fag, and broke his own infamous record by the ingenuity of his barbarities.

The hapless butt of these could never allude to them in his manhood without a sick shiver. Nor could he trust himself to enumerate the details of his school-experiences. That he was beaten, half-starved, and set about degrading and menial tasks beyond his strength, was but a small part of his grievances. The victim says of his brutal senior:

"He had, by his savage treatment of me, impressed such a dread of his figure upon my mind that I well remember being afraid to lift up my eyes upon him, higher than his knees, and that I knew him by his shoe-buckles better than any other part of his dress."

He adds an ejaculatory prayer to which less sanctified readers will be slow in responding "Amen!"

"May the Lord pardon him, and may we meet in glory!"

It is argued in extenuation of a system that admitted of such outrages that it

"made boys hardy" and helped on with the manufacture of English pluck, honoured by powerful nations and feared by weak. A lad who had roughed it at school entered the world, of which the school was supposed to be a type and foretaste, with a heart, a head, and a fist for any fate. It was the principle of the survival of the fittest reduced to hourly and heroic practice. The study of general principles was the specialty of the century. Appreciation of the importance of personal traits and of the value and the danger of personal peculiarities was reserved for more merciful modern educators. Tough and tender went into one and the same mill, the wisest preceptors having no misgiving that what hardened stout fibres might destroy delicate textures.

It is superfluous to subjoin, after reading and hearing of William Cowper's early school-days, that he carried the scars of that terrible period to his grave, with the graver effects of disordered nerves and physical cowardice. All that could be done in after-life for the broken and jarred mechanism was to put it together so that it would work for a time and after a fashion.

"God," says Dr. Holmes, "would never create a hunchback and then damn him for not sitting straight."

A ruthful truism we shall have occasion to recall at every turn of the life we are following.

The lad's eyes failed him when he had been two years at school. Floating specks danced between his vision and his books, and blurred the familiar outlines of his tyrant's shoe-buckles. It would not have been surprising had he wept himself blind, and cold, nervousness, and unsuitable food doubtless took their evil part in the work. His father and the family physician decided to place him under the care of a Mr. Disney, an oculist of some eminence, whose wife was his fellow-practitioner. Mrs. Disney seems to have had especial charge of the Rector's son. Under another alien roof, the boy, practically homeless and orphaned,—although nominally the possessor of a parent who paid his bills for lodgings, board, and medical services,—passed two comparatively comfortable years. He gained health there, and some degree of robustness. It was to the oculist's interest to keep his patient in good physical case, and not his business

to interfere with the boy's personal liberty. The tortured nerves and wearied frame were "rested out"; the shadow of the tyrannical taskmaster passed from his spirit, and something of the natural, gladsome youth that should belong to his years awoke in him.

At this period of his early life, he became intimate with his cousins Harriet, Anne, Elizabeth, and Castres, the children of the Reverend Roger Donne, his mother's brother. Their home at Catfield in Norfolk was also his during his holidays while at school and with the Disneys. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that Anne (afterward Mrs. Bodham) was the donor of his mother's picture to him after they had both passed middle life. The presumption is that she came into possession of the treasure as her aunt's namesake.

He was but ten years old when he was enrolled in the public school of Westminster, an educational institution of high reputation, and always full of gentlemen's sons.

At no other period of his life was he so nearly the normal boy in body and in spirits as in the ensuing four years. There was bullying in this renowned school, and

plenty of it, the weaker and smaller lads being, as always, the chief sufferers. Reports, private and unofficial, of atrocities winked at by the authorities, and uncondemned by public opinion, are before us that cast into the shade the worst cases of "hazing" ever glossed over in American colleges.

Cowper was never robust, and never physically brave. We are naturally curious to learn to what he owed immunity from the persecutions which the knowledge of these deficiencies would excite among the lawless and belligerent young animals by whom he was surrounded. He played football and gained a certain degree of proficiency in that barbaric form of recreation, convincing proof of marvellous improvement in his bodily powers ; he was a good cricketer and eager to take the field whenever a game was called. His surprise at the awakening into this new life is pathetic when one considers that the average English boy then took frolic and health and the love of fun of whatever description as a matter of course, a development as natural as the taste for toffey and half-holidays and robbing apple-orchards. He had not known

what it was to be happy for so long that gladness wore an unfamiliar face. The most Cowperish touch in his recital of the halcyon Westminster days is an incident that befell him one night in passing through a churchyard.

He relates it with the comment : "I had become so forgetful of mortality that, surveying my activity and strength, and observing the evenness of my pulse, I began to entertain, with no small complacency, a notion that perhaps I might never die."

The sunken graves and headstones among which he tramped as a short-cut home, after a joyous afternoon on the cricket- or ball-grounds, were no more to him than the pavements and houses of a city street. On this particular night, a sexton was digging a grave by the light of his lantern, and, tossing up a skull from the pit in which he stood, hit Cowper on the knee.

"This little accident was an alarm to my conscience ; for that event may be numbered among the best religious documents which I received at Westminster."

We are distinctly sorry for the shock, and the recollection ; are jealous, to the point of greed, for every glint of sunshine

that could be his very own before the coming of the days of darkness that were to be many. With the same feeling we read of his fondness for Vincent Bourne, the usher in the fifth form to whom he owed the love for Latin verse which yielded him occupation and solace while he lived.

"I love the memory of Vinny Bourne. I think him a better poet than Tibullus, Propertius, Ausonius, or any of the writers in his way, except Ovid, and not at all inferior to him. I love him too with a love of partiality, because he was usher of the Fifth Form at Westminster when I passed through it."

A bubble of boyish merriment breaks through the half-pensive reminiscence in the anecdote of the prank played upon the easy-going pedagogue by a titled pupil. The usher's wig was thick with pomatum and powder he was too lazy to comb out.

"I well remember seeing the Duke of Richmond set fire to the greasy locks, and box his ears to put it out again."

Pomatum, erudition, and horse-play were characteristic of the Westminster of the seventeen-forties. To the unexpected combination we are indebted for one of the few broad laughs we have in the review of a career so early and so darkly overcast.

Cowper's zest in the narrative is significant of what we are not slow in discovering, *i.e.*, that in those years at Westminster was brought to light, if not born, the sense of humour which blended so strangely with incurable melancholy in his subsequent life.

He says in playful affectionateness of Bourne, that "he made me as idle as himself." Yet the "love of partiality" he bore the usher, or love of learning for learning's sake, made him a good student in and out of school. "Vinny" gave him a bias for Greek and Latin classics. He read Homer with avidity and of his own volition, scribbled Latin verses for pleasure when he had finished those allotted as daily tasks, and won more than one prize for his work along these lines. All that we learn of his public-school life goes to prove genuine love of knowledge and study, amiability and a sort of affectionate facileness of disposition inclining him to lean and be led, instead of striking out for himself and forging ahead in paths of his own engineering, and withal, the peculiar isolation of his lot. Again and again in his autobiographical papers he returns to Westminster days and friendships as to a care-free asylum.

His intimates there were, perhaps without exception, more stalwart of mind and of will than himself. Many made their mark upon their generation, among them Warren Hastings. Lord Dartmouth, in whose Manor of Olney Cowper lived for so many years, sat next him on the sixth form, and his most intimate friend was Sir William Russell, a lineal descendant of Oliver Cromwell. If any of "the boys" were ever otherwise than kind to him, William forgot it in the affectionate review of the terms they had passed together before the plunge into the maelström which was to bear them in different directions, and cast them upon widely dissimilar shores.

Most of his fellows had definite aims and purposes. He had none. His father had thrust him out of the warmth and luxury of home into the misery of fagdom and the turbulence of a boys' school ; then boarded him out to be doctored as he might send an ailing horse to a veterinary stable. When cured, he was consigned, still as a chattel, to the uncertain mercies of democratic Westminster. In his acquiescence in the autocrat's will, the son was not merely obedient ; he was dutiful to a degree that

is amazing to us in considering his temperament and needs. So, at the end of his academic course, when the same autocratic will designated the next step, William offered no resistance, active or passive. Grandfather Judge and Lord Chancellor uncle were arguments for grandson's and nephew's acceptance of the law as a profession, the cogency of which satisfied the Reverend John, and was not gainsaid by the junior.

CHAPTER III

LAW-STUDIES — THEODORA — FATHER'S INFLUENCE AND DEATH

WESTMINSTER dormitory, quadrangle, and cricket-green were exchanged for a corner in the stuffy office of a London attorney's office by day, with bed and board in the attorney's house, and the dutiful son began what was, at the best, a lounge through the several stations of the Bar-ward road. He studied law when he felt like doing so, and usually felt more like strolling, in the same light-hearted, purposeless fashion, around to the house of Ashley Cowper, his father's brother, who lived at No. 30 Southampton Row, but a block or two away.

"Ashley Cowper," says a biographer, "was a very little man in a white hat lined with yellow, and his nephew used to say

that he would some day be picked by mistake for a mushroom and popped into a basket."

The oft-quoted witticism was among the saucy hits that made the small "mushroom's" daughters regard their cousin as uncommonly good company. Harriet (better known to us as Lady Hesketh) and Theodora Cowper were what we would class as "thoroughly nice girls." London was full of temptations to an idle young man who had never earned a penny for himself, and was, therefore, ignorant of the value of money and time. Extravagance, gaming, and profligacy were the hall-marks of men of fashion who had wealth enough to keep their heads above the waters of bankruptcy and their bodies out of the debtors' prison, and the man of fashion, being what he was, had a host of imitators without wealth and without wit. The drawing-room of No. 30 Southampton Row, where Ashley Cowper's brace of pretty and vivacious daughters "made giggle" over silly next-to-nothings, was a clean, safe haunt for the lad of eighteen. His pure mother—dead these dozen years—could not have chosen more

virtuous associates for him, or more innocent recreation for his unemployed evenings and many lazy afternoons.

Unless, indeed, she had held the same views with Ashley Cowper upon the dangerous inexpediency of marriages between cousins german. It was inevitable that the affectionate, indolent boy should make love to one or the other of his charming kinswomen. His choice lighted—capriciously or from some occult principle of natural selection—upon the younger of the sisters, Theodora. The affair may have begun in giggle, and been fostered by propinquity, but the result showed the attachment to be no boy-and-girl fancy. The pair had taken it seriously and fairly tested the stuff of which it was made by the time William Cowper attained his nominal majority, and the very little man in the white hat lined with yellow rubbed his eyes open to the fact that something more than fun-making was going on in the heart of his home.

The father is proverbially slow of sight and of wit with regard to his daughters' love-matters. The awakening to the probability of courtship and marriage for them, the certainty that they will prefer other men

to himself, some day,—if the exhibition of bad taste be not already an accomplished and mortifying fact,—is always a disagreeable surprise. Theodora's father was no more astute than other parents of his sex in foreseeing what was bound to happen ; he was prompt and resolute in action when he did awaken. His nephew William was well enough in his place, having commendable parts of a certain sort. He could scribble tolerable verse in English, an accomplishment which the uncle liked to believe and declare came from the Cowper side of the family. Ashley turned out poems that were not bad, and his clerical brother John had a neat knack in the same direction. William's Latin and Greek verses were said to be clever ; he had a pretty wit in conversation, and his manners were not unbecoming the descendant of a King, a distinguished Jurist, and a Doctor of Divinity. Being now one-and-twenty years of age, he would soon be called to the Bar, and thus be placed in the direct line of legal promotion, his antecedents being propitious to such advancement. He would have a genteel patrimony at the death of his father, with but one brother—John, now in Cam-

bridge University—to divide it with him. That foolish baby, Theodora, was fond of her good-looking cousin and he of her.

"If you marry William Cowper, what will you do for a living?" he had asked his daughter, testily.

She laughed in his frowning face.

"Do, sir? Why, wash all day, and ride out on the great dog at night!"

The paternal protest was not to be turned aside by a jest. Over against the pros of the case in hand were the cons of the suitor's disinclination to take his profession—or anything except love-making—seriously; the absolute certainty, to his uncle's apprehension, that he would saunter, dreamily and smilingly, through life as he was accustomed to lounge into the girls' sitting-room at all hours of the day, when he and they should be busied elsewhere. He was a decent enough lad, but "Ne'er do weel" was written all over him, and he was Theodora's first cousin,—but one remove from fraternal relationship. Marriage between them was not to be thought of.

Filial piety must have been a family characteristic in the Cowper connection. If the lovers rebelled in word and in verse

at the father's decree, there was no open revolt.

"They sensibly bowed to fate, and agreed to separate," says Mr. Thomas Knight, Cowper's latest biographer. Among the love-poems treasured by Theodora while she lived, was one describing their parting :

> "Yet, ere we looked our last farewell,
> From her dear lips this comfort fell ;—
> 'Fear not that Time, where'er we rove,
> Or absence, shall abate my love.'"

That Time was to prove how the girl kept her promise. The evils of such marriages as the young creatures had proposed are better understood now than then ; yet it may be questioned if William Cowper could have done a wiser thing for himself than by eloping with his cousin, and afterward, under her loving encouragement, "buckling down" to the business of a hard-working attorney, with prospects founded upon family influence.

His verses to "Delia" are but echoes of the moans wrung from him under the cruel disappointment. While he lived and was rational, there was in his heart a corner consecrated to the memory of this first and

blameless love. We respect it and him the more because he did not pose as love-lorn, or the victim of paternal tyranny.

It was, undoubtedly, in the hope of forgetting sorrow in active and congenial occupation that, soon after he was admitted to the Bar, and had taken up his abode in the Temple, he joined himself to six other graduates of Westminster in a literary society under the name of the Nonsense Club. If the organisation existed in our day, the members would call themselves "literati," and be sneered at by graver workers in the realm of letters as "dilettanti." They thought much of themselves and of each other, and of what they did, while the society lived. Their very names are strange to nine out of ten fairly well-read people of the present century, although two of them, Churchill and Colman, owned the *St. James Chronicle* and were prolific writers of verse, dramas, reviews, and translations from the Latin and Greek classics. William Cowper was a contributor to the *St. James Chronicle* and other periodicals, trying his 'prentice hand upon essays, poems "after" his beloved classical masters, and an occasional English ballad. "I have been

a dabbler in rhyme ever since I was fourteen years old," he says of himself. His trial-effort was a translation of an elegy by Tibullus.

The specimens of his early work that have been preserved are neat, some affected, and never original in thought or treatment. Among his contributions to *The Connoisseur* was one upon *The Art of Keeping a Secret*, which had the not unusual effect of convincing the author of the strength of his own arguments.

"I once wrote a *Connoisseur* upon the subject of secret-keeping," he told William Unwin in 1780, "and from that day to this I believe I have never divulged one."

Up to the twenty-fifth year of a, thus far, profitless life, he had not falsified his uncle's prognostications of his career. Always singularly devoid of natural ambition, such aspirations as were excited by his fellows of the Nonsense Club soared no higher than the columns of the reviews I have mentioned.

When the Reverend John Cowper, D.D., died in 1756, leaving his second wife a widow, William had done little or nothing to justify his father's selection of a profes-

sion for him. If the parent were chagrined, he died and made no sign. As nearly as we can judge, he was of a dogmatic, yet philosophical, turn of mind, and did not weep over the irretrievable. He had used his own judgment in placing his sons where they might, and ought to, do well if they would. Neither of them ever accused him of neglect or unkindness. On the contrary, William speaks of him, incidentally, as "most indulgent." Southey reasons that, "if he had not loved his father dearly and found that home a happy one, he would not have 'preferred it to a palace.'"

The unimaginative reader is, nevertheless, struck by the fact that the only lament left on record by the son of his parting from Great Birkhampstead Rectory "forever," is in a "long adieu to fields and woods from which I thought I should never be parted."

If he never pretended to miss his father sensibly, or to mourn for him long or deeply, it was because he was innately sincere, and, as I have said, no *poseur*. Still, in our quest for causes obvious and recondite which coloured and shaped William Cowper's character, we cannot escape the conclusion that the father's influence, however indi-

rect, was strong in results. It was not what he did, but what he left undone and unsaid, that wrought upon the plastic nature. He ignored the most sacred obligations of fatherhood after the mother's death redoubled these. He did not interpose, as he, alone, had the right to do, to save the motherless baby from downright barbarity in the two years following his great loss; he gave the lad his head in Westminster and in London, and, if he ever acted as the spiritual guide of the young soul, we have no intimation of the truth. The one indication of a disposition to direct his son's mind to an existence beyond the grave, given by William's pen, is unpleasing to repulsiveness :

"When I was about eleven years of age my father desired me to read a vindication of self-murder and give him my sentiments upon the question. I did so, and argued against it. My father heard my reasons and was silent, neither approving nor disapproving ; from whence I inferred that he sided with the author against me, "though, all the time, I believe the true motive of his conduct was that he wanted, if he could, to think favourably of the state of a departed friend who had, some years before, destroyed himself."

The more probable explanation of the

divine's singular behaviour in first putting the pamphlet into the hands of a morbid, introspective lad, and then, by silence, endorsing the fiendish contention of the writer, is that he was, all the while, thinking of something else. Absence of mind from all that bore upon the material or spiritual welfare of his offspring would seem to have been habitual with the professional physician of souls. The solution of the enigma is not complimentary to him as parent, clergyman, or human being. It is preferable to the hypothesis that suggested itself to the lad then, and returned to him with cumulative force in the hour of supreme temptation.

COWPER COAT-OF-ARMS.

CHAPTER IV

"PUSH-PIN"—HEREDITARY GLOOMS—DR. JOHN DONNE

UNTIL William Cowper was a man of one-and-thirty, his desultory, shiftless mode of living had not weighed uncomfortably upon his thoughts. Much less had it offended a conscience that became, afterward, unnaturally and hurtfully sensitive. He could hardly have been called idle, for his pen was continually employed upon one theme and another. His brother's tastes were cognate to his, and the two collaborated in a translation of the *Henriade* into a popular version. Together they produced eight books of heroic couplets, each writing four. John got twenty guineas for his work, William waiving his claim to the meagre compensation. A more delightful task was the loving reperusal of the *Iliad*

and the *Odyssey*, and a critical comparison of the noble originals with Pope's translation.

"There is hardly the thing in the world of which Pope was so entirely destitute as a taste for Homer," he says caustically. "When we looked for the simplicity and majesty of Homer in his English representation, we found puerile conceits instead, extravagant metaphors, and the tinsel of modern embellishment in every possible position."

Of this apparently dead level, separating his entrance upon the nominal duties of his profession from the tragedy that put an end to these, he wrote, a quarter-century thereafter:

"Everything that we do is in reality important, 'though half that we do seems to be push-pin."

He had been playing push-pin for a third of his years, not after the fashion of the conventional young man of fashion, nor with the heavy indolence of a drone in the human hive. He indulged in no expensive fancies, and had no relish for coarse dissipation; he was essentially refined and his impulses were not wanting in nobility. His life was simply objectless. He wrought upon his manuscripts when the humour seized him, and if, as did not always hap-

pen, they were finished and to his liking, he either threw them into his desk and forgot them, or into the hopper of the public prints, and never bethought himself of their after-history. That he was not habitually melancholy, or even a sufferer from frequent fits of depression, his private letters and anecdotes connected with this epoch prove to all except those who are determined to make him out a mental and spiritual hypochondriac from the nursery.

Each of his biographers has his own—and to himself satisfactory—explanation of the insanity that overtook him in his thirty-second year. The fretting pain, never allayed, of disappointed love, foiled literary ambitions, and—more persistently than these—religious fanaticism, are the theories most affected by professional limners and their readers.

The first of these is easily disposed of. There is no doubt of Cowper's genuine attachment for the lovely cousin he had wished to marry, and that her father's inflexible refusal of his consent to the union broke off the intimacy between them, perhaps all association even as friends after they were convinced that Ashley Cowper's

"determination was unalterable." That the young suitor suffered intensely is as certain. His lines on this subject to the confidante of both, and his lifelong friend, Lady Hesketh, formerly Harriet Cowper, are nearly as well known as his apostrophe to his mother's picture. It does not, however, escape the notice of the cool-headed critic that he couples, in his lament over his ruined hopes, the death of his dear friend and schoolmate Sir William Russell with the loss of his Theodora :

" Deprived of every joy I valued most,
My friend torn from me and my mistress lost,

. . . . . .

Still, still I mourn with each returning day,
Him, snatched by fate in early youth away,
And her, through tedious years of doubt and pain,
Fixed in her choice, and faithful, but in vain.

. . . . . .

See me, ere yet my distant course half-done,
Cast forth, a wanderer, on a wild unknown.
See me, neglected on the world's rude coast,
Each dear companion of my voyage lost."

The threnody wins us to sympathy with the poet's pain, but does not bear out the hypothesis of an all-absorbing, overmastering love for one woman. We detect but a

faint sparkle of the old glow in the ashes of years when he writes to her sister in their middle age :

"I still look back to the memory of your sister and regret her. But—how strange it is ! if we were to meet now, we should not know each other."

In a lighter mood that shows how sparkle had gone out and ashes had cooled, he says in another letter to his former confidante :

"So much as I love you, my dear cousin, I wonder how the deuce it has happened I was never in love with you. Thank Heaven that I never was ! for, at this time I have had a pleasure in writing to you, which in that case I should have forfeited. Let me hear from you, or I shall reap but half the reward that is due to my noble indifference."

The gallant badinage is of an age when letter-writing was a fine art, and from the hand of an adept in it. "He jests at scars who never felt a wound," or to whom one scar means no more than another.

The final separation from Theodora, after which neither ever saw the other, was not two years old when he could expatiate to a correspondent upon the charms of a "lovely and beloved" sixteen-year-old girl, "of whom I have often talked to you."

"When she speaks, you might believe that a Muse is speaking. Woe is me that so bright a star looks to another region. Having risen in the West Indies, thither it is about to return, and will leave me nothing but sighs and tears."

Theodora's lover was no more fickle than most of his age and sex; neither was he phenomenally constant.

Enough has been said of his dilettanteism and unfeigned indifference to literary fame to render discussion of the second diagnosis superfluous. The poet's friends were even more solicitous than he to conserve a reputation he would never have bestirred himself to gain but for their incitement. As we shall see, his best works were suggested to, and urged upon him by them.

The assertion that much dwelling upon religious subjects, especially upon the aspects of these presented by the fast-rising Evangelical party of that decade, wrought upon a lively imagination to the overthrow of judgment and the undoing of reason itself, is scarcely more tenable. William Cowper had been duly prepared for confirmation at Westminster School by the master, Dr. Nicholls. He makes grateful

note of "the pains which Dr. Nicholls took to prepare us for confirmation."

"The old man acquitted himself of this duty like one who had a deep sense of its importance, and I believe most of us were struck by his manner, and affected by his exhortations. Then, for the first time, I attempted to pray in secret; but, being but little accustomed to that exercise of the heart, and having very childish notions of religion, I found it a difficult and painful task, and was, even then, frightened at my own insensibility. This difficulty, 'though it did not subdue my good purposes 'till the ceremony of confirmation was passed, soon after entirely conquered them. I lapsed into a total forgetfulness of God, with all the disadvantages of being the more hardened, for being softened to no purpose."

According to his own testimony, he had been, thereafter, as little troubled by religious speculations as by the conviction of his own sinfulness. His intellectual belief in the evidences of Christianity was never shaken and was sometimes blatant. He reports a controversy with a deist, when, Cowper says, he was, himself, "half-intoxicated," and "vindicated the truth of Scripture, in the very act of rebellion against its dictates." The action of his opponent, who "cut short the matter by alleging that, if what I said was true I was certainly damned by my own choosing" passed

with a laugh like many another irreverent *bon mot.*

The singular omission of a hereditary bias to insanity in the recapitulation, by thoughtful writers, of the possible and probable origin of the horrible malady which was to becloud the rest of his days, can be accounted for only on the score of the comparative neglect of prenatal influences on the part of the scientific men of the eighteenth century. An eminent modern writer upon psychological phenomena avers, as his deliberate conviction, that not one man in a thousand is utterly free from monomania, while two-thirds of our daily associates are insane upon one or more subjects; a state of things referable, he says, to the fact that mental and moral diseases are more surely passed down from parents to children than physical infirmities.

Upon the second page of this book mention is made of an ancestor of Anne Donne and her sons, who played a prominent part in the English Church and among English men of letters, a century before William Cowper was born. A contemporary poet thus eulogises the great Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's:

" Whatsoever wrong
By ours was done the Greek or Latin tongue
Thou hast redeemed, and opened us a mine
Of rich and pregnant fancy, drawn a line
Of masculine expression, which had good
Old Orpheus seen, or all the ancient brood
Our superstitious fools admire, and hold
Their lead more precious than thy burnished gold,
Thou hadst been their exchequer.
Here lies a King that ruled as he thought fit
The universal monarchy of wit ;
Here lies two Flamens, and both these the best,—
Apollo's first, at last the True God's Priest."

From this one of his distinguished forbears, William Cowper may well have drawn the love for "Greek and Latin tongue" that marked him from early boyhood; the "rich and pregnant fancy" that earned him lasting fame; the patient, loving care, the polishing and repolishing, line by line and stanza by stanza, characteristic of his literary methods, and furnishing the "burnished gold" of composition to his world of admiring readers. What else entered into his inheritance?

I have held in my hands a copy of the rare book to which Edmund Gosse devotes eight or nine pages in his fascinating group of essays entitled *Gossip in a Library*. The caption is:

Death's Duel; or a Consolation to the Soule against the dying Life and living Death of the Body Delivered in a sermon at White Hall before the King's Majesty, in the beginning of Lent, 1630. By that late learned and reverend Divine John Donne, Dr. in Divinity & Deane of St. Paul's, London. Being his last Sermon, and called by his Majesty's household, "The Doctor's owne Funeral Sermon."

Gosse calls this discourse, "one of the most creepy fragments of theological literature it would be easy to find." The dying poet shrinks from no physical horror and no ghostly terror of the great crisis which he was, himself, to be the first to pass through.

"That which we call life," he says, "is but *Hebdomada mortium*, a week of death, seven days, seven periods of our life spent in dying, a dying seven times over, and there is an end. Our birth dies in infancy, and our infancy dies in youth, and youth and rest die in age, and age also dies, and determines all."

While preparing his sermon, feeling the inroads of a mortal disease within his body, he ordered a burial-urn,

"just large enough to hold his feet, and a board as long as his body, to be produced. When these articles were ready they were brought into his study, and the old man stripped off his clothes, wrapped himself in a wind-

JOHN DONNE

(FROM OLD PRINT IN THE POSSESSION OF BEVERLY CHEW, ESQ., OF NEW YORK

ing-sheet and stood upright in the little wooden urn, supported by leaning against the board. His limbs were arranged like those of dead persons, and when his eyes had been closed, a painter was introduced into the room, and desired to make a full-length and full-sized picture of this terrific object—this solemn, theatrical presentment of life in death. . . . All this fortnight, and to the moment of his death, the terrible portrait of himself in his winding-sheet stood near his bedside, where it could be the hourly object of his attention.

"So one of the greatest churchmen and one of the greatest, if most eccentric, of its lyrical poets passed away in the very pomp of death, on the 31st of March 1631."*

If one tithe of our specialist's sweeping condemnation of his fellow-creatures be true, and like begets like from generation unto generation, John Donne's freakish fancies may have been seed, buried long out of sight and ken of men, but quick at heart with evil life, and destined finally to spring up in his ill-starred descendant. What Donne's contemporaries catalogued as eccentricities budded and blossomed into madness under the unfortunate conditions of Cowper's early years. Had he, or his relatives, or medical advisers had a glimmering appreciation of the lurking taint in his blood and brain, they would have recog-

* *Gossip in a Library.*

nised what should have put them on their guard before the open outbreak of lunacy.

Cowper was still a law-student when he wrote to one of the Westminster "seven" of assailants

> "That with a black, infernal train
> Make cruel inroads in my brain,
> And daily threaten to drive thence
> My little garrison of sense.
> The fierce banditti which I mean
> Are gloomy thoughts, led on by spleen."

The fell train had a definite anxiety as leader in 1763. His slender means were so nearly exhausted and his prospects of money-making so unpropitious that, for the first time in his experience, he was alarmed as to his future. Casting about in his mind for some way of driving the wolf from his respectable door, he asked a friend if, in the event of the death of the Clerk of the Journals of the House of Lords, his (Cowper's) relative, Major Cowper, who had influence in that quarter, might not be prevailed upon to give him the post. It is likely that neither of the young men would have recollected the conversation, had not the official in question died suddenly soon

afterwards. Two other offices, yet more lucrative, became vacant about the same time, and Major Cowper astonished and "dazzled" his kinsman by the sudden offer of "the two most profitable places, intending the other for his friend, Mr. Arnold."

Cowper's brain needed but a touch, at this juncture, to destroy its balance. The reaction from the dread of poverty to the certainty of what seemed to him affluence, was a push and a violent one. To his patron's surprise, after accepting the "splendid proposal," he asked time to deliberate upon it, and

"for the space of a week was harassed day and night, perplexed by the apparent folly of casting away the only visible chance of being well provided for and retaining it. First he gave up the two places offered to him, and flattered himself that the clerkship of the journals would fall fairly and easily within the scope of his abilities. Next, he was seized with nervous horrors at thought of the preliminary examination at the bar of the House; then racked by misgivings as to his ability to perform the duties of the office, and, when these barriers were passed, conceived a terror of the inferior clerks, who, he imagined, were inimical to him.

"The feelings of a man when he arrives at the place of execution are probably much like mine every time I

set my foot in the office, which was every day for more than half-a-year together."

The likelihood that the "powerful party formed among the Lords" against him, and the sulkiness of the sub-officials to the newly appointed head of the office, were a figment of Cowper's heated imagination is increased by the rally of senses and spirits at Margate, where he spent his vacation that year. In the rebound of spirit caused by the anticipation of the furlough, he wrote cheerily to Lady Hesketh :

". . . My days are spent in reading the Journals, and my nights in dreaming of them. An employment not very agreeable to a head that has long been habituated to the luxury of choosing its subject, and has been as little employed upon business as if it had grown upon the shoulders of a much wealthier gentleman. But the numskull pays for it now, and will not presently forget the discipline it has undergone lately.

"If I succeed in this doubtful piece of promotion, I shall have at least this satisfaction to reflect upon,—that the volumes I write will be treasured up with the utmost care for ages, and will last as long as the English constitution—a duration which ought to satisfy the vanity of any author who has a spark of love for his country."

The pleasantry, forced or spontaneous, was his last for many a weary day. The

beneficial effect of Margate and congenial society was partial and temporary. In the autumn he was recalled to London and the employment he had found distasteful from the beginning of his attempt to fill the place. It was now so intolerable that he welcomed the approach of actual insanity that would release him from daily torment :

"My chief fear was that my senses would not fail me time enough to excuse my appearance at the Bar of the House of Lords, which was the only purpose I wanted it to answer. Accordingly, the day of decision drew near, and I was still in my senses [!], though in my heart I had formed many wishes, and by word of mouth expressed many expectations to the contrary."

This was sheer lunacy, and the art which hid the truth from the clerks with whom the shy, reserved stranger was not popular, and the friends who rejoiced in his apparent prosperity, was the cunning of a madman who did not know that he was bereft of reason, as of hope.

CHAPTER V

GLOOM DEEPENS INTO MANIA—ATTEMPTED SUICIDE—THEODORA'S CONSTANCY

THE particulars of the means by which William Cowper, distraught and miserable, tried to accomplish what he rightly names "the dark and hellish purpose of self-murder" are not pleasant reading.

It is one of the problems of his times that, after the recovery of his reason, those who loved him best, and to whom he believed he owed, under God, his soul's salvation, should have encouraged him to put the tale upon paper with scrupulous circumstantiality of revolting particulars. The writing was enough, of itself, to invite a relapse.

As was natural, memory, treacherous in other respects, reproduced with fatal fidelity the incident of the treatise upon suicide put into the child's hand by his father, and

the father's apparent acquiescence in the writer's views. "The circumstance now weighed mightily with me," he says. It was backed up by chance conversations with certain people whom he met at chop-houses and taverns. These agreed with the quiet, scholarly gentleman who adroitly led the talk into that channel, that "the only reason why some men were content to drag on their sorrows with them to the grave, and others were not, was that the latter were endued with a certain indignant fortitude of spirit, teaching them to despise life, which the former wanted."

Moved by this "indignant fortitude," the doomed man bought a bottle of laudanum, and, the date of the much-dreaded "attendance at the bar of the House" being still a week off, carried it about with him, determined to use it at the eleventh hour, if no other way of escaping the ordeal presented itself. A newspaper letter, which his diseased fancy construed into a covert attack upon himself, hastened the execution of his design.

Like one in a nightmare, he sought opportunity of getting rid of his life and found none,—in the fields, where a temporary

change of purpose diverted his mind; in his chambers, subject to the continual intrusion of the laundress and her husband;—until—still as in a troubled dream—he hit upon yet another expedient for bringing about the desired end. Throwing himself into a coach, he ordered the coachman to drive to the quay, "intending never to return." The water was low, and a porter or watchman eyed him suspiciously; he reëntered the carriage, drove back to the Temple, shut himself up in his room, uncorked the bottle, and lifted it to his mouth.

He believed, always, that the impression of an invisible hand "swaying the bottle downward as often as he set it against his lips," was a reality, and not a nervous delusion born of madness. After a score of futile attempts to swallow the laudanum, —the most determined of which was foiled by the discovery that the fingers of both hands were as closely contracted as if bound with a cord, and entirely useless,—he threw the poison away, "undetermined as to the manner of dying, but still bent upon self-murder as the only possible deliverance." On the night preceding the day "that was to place him at the bar of the House," he

tried to stab himself with a penknife, "placing it upright under his left breast, and leaning all his weight against it; but the point was broken off square and it would not penetrate."

When the day dawned and he was still alive, he hanged himself upon the top of the door of his room, after several ineffectual efforts to make the cord secure upon the framework of his bed. After hanging so long that consciousness quite forsook him, his life was saved by the breaking of the cord. "The bitterness of temporal death had passed" before the agony of returning physical life took hold upon him. Bruised and giddy, he crept back to bed, and early in the morning sent for Major Cowper, to whom he showed the broken noose and told the whole story.

"His words were—'My dear Mr. Cowper, you terrify me! To be sure you cannot hold the office at this rate. Where is the deputation?' I gave him the key of the drawer where it was deposited; and, his business requiring his immediate attendance, he took it away with him.

"And thus ended all my connection with the Parliament office."

The action of the practical kinsman in

the instant removal of what William, and perhaps the Major himself, believed to be the exciting cause of the fit of frenzy, was the most sensible measure that could be devised. If the sufferer's horrible apprehensions had had any basis in the facts of the case, and he really feared the Examination—the grisly hobgoblin that had pursued him for weeks and months,—the certainty that it had vanished would have been his cure. As it was, another and more awful phantom took its place.

"Before I arose from bed it was suggested to me that there was nothing wanted but murder to fill up the measure of my iniquities, and that, 'though I had failed in my design, yet I had all the guilt of that crime to answer for. A sense of God's wrath, and a deep despair of escaping, instantly succeeded. The fear of death became much more prevalent in me than ever the desire had been."

As asphyxia and the fall had brought on "excessive pressure upon the brain" and other alarming symptoms, he summoned a physician, and also wrote to his brother John at Cambridge, confessing what he had done, but assuring him that he was now "desirous to live as long as it pleased the Almighty to spare him."

Then, instead of following the physician's advice and going to the country, he shut himself up in his lonely chambers, haunted by the anguished fantasies of the last fortnight, and faced his sins "now set in array against him."

Candid inspection of one's naked soul,—the awful setting of one's secret sins in the light of God's countenance,—is enough to drive a healthy mind to despair. The story of what this sick and blinded soul endured is not—to use a pietistic technicality—"to edification," however different may have been the judgment of those who incited him to the revelation. The battle that ensued was not a spiritual struggle, but the development of a mental malady. Archbishop Tillotson's sermons, turned over in piteous haste, and John Cowper's comments upon them; a volume of Beaumont, picked up at random in a friend's apartment, and every other book he opened, contained "something that struck him to the heart." The laugh of a street-lounger, as the haunted man passed him; the salutations of acquaintances; a ballad, trolled on the corner by a wandering musician—had meaning, point, and insult for him. He

was terrified in dreams ; he reeled in walking ; he shrank from the sight of his fellow-men, and had intolerable anguish in the thought that he could not escape the All-seeing Eye.

When John, full of tender sympathy, pierced to the heart with the sight of his brother's misery, tried to comfort him, he got but one answer : "O Brother ! I am *damned !* Think of Eternity, and then think what it is to be DAMNED ! "

Martin Madan, one of the new school of Evangelical believers and teachers, answered William's request that he would come to him. "If there was any balm in Gilead, he must administer it." The "enthusiast" sat down upon the bedside of his afflicted friend, and reasoned of original sin and the corruption of man's fallen nature, until Cowper listened with something like calmness to a doctrine that "set him on a level with the rest of mankind, and made his condition appear less desperate." Then the visitor began to pour into the fevered wounds the true balm of Gospel truth, insisting upon "the efficacy of the blood of Jesus and His righteousness . . . lastly, the necessity of a lively faith in Jesus Christ.

. . . It was the gift of God which the speaker trusted He would bestow upon me."

"I wish He would!" groaned the tempest-tossed soul. "A very irreverent petition," he subjoins, in his narrative, "but a very sincere one."

It may have appeared to Madan in the same light. For my part, I can think of nothing but the strong crying and tears with which the father of the epileptic boy sobbed—"Lord, I believe! help Thou mine unbelief!" and that the only All-wise Healer neither reasoned with nor preached to the convulsed lad.

Let us bring to a swift close our painful abstract of the long-drawn-out agony of the recital. Madan's ministrations and John's brotherly attentions brought a few hours of comparative ease. The patient slept, and awoke in tenfold greater anguish of mind. About an hour after John arrived, next morning, excruciating pains in the head and "a strange and horrible darkness" fell upon the patient. He raved incessantly and wildly.

"All that remained clear was the sense of sin and the expectation of punishment. . . .

"My brother instantly perceived the change [!] and

consulted with my friends on the best manner to dispose of me."

Among those called into consultation upon the unhappy "case," as it was now decided to be, we note, with interest, the name and visit of Lady Hesketh, now the wife of a wealthy baronet. We cannot help regarding her as, in some sense, the representative of the sister whose silent constancy to the lover of her youth invests her with a halo of saintly steadfastness. As we shall see, in due time, there is evidence that Theodora Cowper never lost sight of her unfortunate cousin. He had written, "I shall always remember her with regret." While keeping herself out of his sight and refraining from all correspondence with him, never so much as sending him a line or a message in Lady Hesketh's many letters, not an incident in his career eluded her knowledge. In the one instance when she could serve him, her hand was put out, as from the veil of maidenly modesty she wore close about her, and supplied his needs. She has no place in the notable group of women whose names and histories are interwoven with Cowper's later life. We do not wear her picture in our

hearts as we treasure the gentle loveliness of the mother he thought of every day. No miniature of "Delia"—

> "through tedious years of doubt and pain,
> Fixed in her choice, and faithful, but in vain,"—

was found among his effects when doubt and pain were passed as a tale that is told. If she had ever written to him, he had not kept her letters. The merest scrap of paper his pen had touched was a priceless relic to her; the verses—many of them no better than "the doggerel of an idle hour"—he had copied out for her reading when they saw each other daily, and had thoughts, hopes, and plans in common, were reverently hoarded for over forty years, and never entrusted to another's keeping until he lapsed into total imbecility. Had she dreamed up to then of going over the faded lines once more with him, and, in the calm twilight of their lives, talking together, as dear friends and kinspeople, of the Past she had never forgotten? When word of his condition reached the faded spinster of fifty-odd years, she committed the packet —sealed—of manuscripts and notes to a friend, with instructions that it was not to

be opened while she lived. The poems thus preserved were published in 1825, together with personal recollections of the poet, collated by Lady Hesketh, in a thin volume now out of print. Theodora Cowper outlived her cousin twenty-four years, dying, unmarried, in 1824. Her name and the lifelong romance of her tender, unspoken fealty entitle her to an honourable place on the list of the world's martyr-heroines.

Lady Hesketh was the last visitor of his own blood whom Cowper was permitted to see before the real nature of his "distemper" was recognised by doctors and friends. After his recovery, he recalls the circumstances of the trying interview to his cousin in several notes full of feeling, and touched by the peculiar grace that made all his letters models of the epistolary art.

"You do not forget, I dare say, that you and Sir Thomas called upon me in my chambers, a very few days before I took leave of London. Then it was that I saw you last, and then it was that I said in my heart upon your going out at the door: 'Farewell! there will be no more intercourse between us forever!' . . .

"What could you think of my unaccountable behaviour to you on that visit? I neither spoke to you, nor looked at you. The solution of the mystery indeed fol-

lowed soon after ; but at the time it must have been inexplicable. The uproar within was even then begun, and my silence was only the sulkiness of a thunderstorm before it opens.

"I am glad, however, that the only instance in which I knew not how to value your company was when I was not in my senses."

And again—

"Since the visit you were so kind as to pay me in the Temple (the only time I ever saw you without pleasure !) what have I not suffered ! . . . Oh, the fever of the brain !"

When quite convinced that a man was insane, physicians and philanthropists had ways and places for the management of him. Dr. Cotton of St. Albans was at the head of a madhouse there. That was what they called it. There was no smoothing over jagged realities with such euphemisms as "Retreats," or even "Asylums." He was a wise specialist in his line, and "of well-known humanity and sweetness of temper."

Yet upon the heels of the attestation, Cowper concludes the harrowing narrative with a sentence that shudders in every word :

"It will be proper to draw a veil over the secrets of my prison-house."

CHAPTER VI

LIFE IN DR. COTTON'S ASYLUM—RECOVERY AND CONVERSION

THE publication of the last verses written by Cowper before he was placed under restraint strikes us as an offence to taste and an outrage to his memory. His friends might as well have preserved a bit of the cord with which he had tried to hang himself, and the bottle that had held the laudanum he was miraculously prevented from swallowing.

The so-called "sapphics" are turgid with misery, and violent in the expression of it. Of literary merit they have little or none. After this shriek from the depths there is a dead silence for five months.

Whatever may have been the dread secrets of his prison-house, unkindness from Dr. Cotton and the attendants had no part

in them, other than their conscientious employment of the drastic remedies then used to subdue mania. He was brought very low in bodily strength, as he records afterwards without a suspicion that any but the most intelligent treatment had contributed to this end.

Eight months went by and John Cowper —one of the fondest of brothers—had a report from the physician-in-chief, a shade more hopeful than those which had preceded it. The patient had emerged so far from the black apathy of despair as to enter into conversation with Dr. Cotton ; had smiled at a funny story, and aroused himself to furnish an anecdote in the same vein.

"He observed the seeming alteration with pleasure," says Cowper's chronicle. "Believing, as well he might, that my smiles were sincere, he thought my recovery well-nigh complete ; but they were, in reality, like the green surface of a morass, pleasant to the eye, but a cover for nothing but rottenness and filth."

It was, then, not surprising that the brother, hastening hopefully to St. Albans, should be bitterly disappointed at William's continued reserve and gloom.

"As much better as despair can make

me," was the only reply he could obtain to his affectionate inquiries. The two were pacing the garden-walks in company, and the fresh air and sunshine may have wrought with John's urgent protestations that the "settled assurance of sudden judgment" crushing the other's soul, was "all a delusion." For the first time since his seizure, a gush of healthful tears came to the relief of the fevered brain.

"If it be a delusion, then am I the happiest of beings!" exclaimed the poor sufferer, and wept himself calm. The first whisper of hope was breathed into the ear of his understanding at that moment. His clearer eyes and more cheerful speech were at once noted by the faithful servant who had tended him through his illness, and the joyful news spread in the staff of the asylum. The blessed change, the more hopeful because gradual and with few fluctuations, progressed satisfactorily in the ensuing weeks. In one of the earliest letters written from St. Albans to Lady Hesketh, he credits John with the inception of the glorious work.

"'Though he only stayed one day with me, his company served to put to flight a thousand deliriums and

delusions which I still laboured under, and the next morning I found myself a new creature."

Such crises are a familiar feature to the specialist in mental and nervous disorders. Up to the day of John's visit, the healthful work had been like the growth of the young root underground. The brotherly sympathy and robust cheer were the sunshine and warm air that made it break the soil and reach up into the light.

Walking in the garden upon another day, he espied a Bible lying upon a seat, left in his way, doubtless, by wise Dr. Cotton. Opening it, the convalescent was moved almost to tears by the story of Lazarus, but without applying to his own case the lesson of Divine compassion it illustrated. Rising the next morning—still with a lighter spirit—before his breakfast was ready, he again picked up a Bible, left, as by accident, upon the window-bench, and fluttered the leaves casually. We give what followed in his own words :

"The first verse I saw was the twenty-fifth of the third chapter of Romans :—

"'*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness*

for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.'

"In a moment I believed and received the Gospel. Whatever my friend Madan had said to me, so long before, revived in its clearness, with 'demonstration of the Spirit and with power.' Unless the Almighty arm had been about me, I think I should have died with gratitude and joy. My eyes filled with tears, and my voice choked with transport. I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder."

Dr. Cotton, himself a man of devout spirit and warm, living piety, was yet a wary physician, and too well versed in the deceitful phases of mania to be prematurely persuaded that this was indeed cure, and not a trick of fancy, or the natural rebound of animal spirits after long repression. Cowper's tribute to his judicious regimen is unequivocal :

"I was not only treated by him with the greatest tenderness while I was ill, and attended with the utmost diligence, but when my reason was restored to me, and I had so much need of a religious friend to converse with to whom I could open my mind without reserve, I could hardly have found a fitter person for the purpose. My eagerness and anxiety to settle my opinions upon that long-neglected point, made it necessary that, while my mind was yet weak and my spirits uncertain, I should have some assistance. . . . How many physicians

would have thought this an irregular appetite, and a symptom of remaining madness! But, if it were so, my friend was as mad as myself; and it was well for me that it was so."

The letter to Lady Hesketh in which he thus pours out his happiness in his new-found joy was written in 1765, a month after his removal from St. Albans. With rare prudence and far-seeing sagacity, Dr. Cotton had impressed upon the patient's relatives the propriety of leaving him in his present quarters for ten months after the hopeful change.

What Cowper aptly terms the "storm of sixty-three" had swept away the last remnants of his slender patrimony. He returned to the world from which he had been secluded for nearly two years, as destitute as when he entered it, a wailing, naked infant, and, it may be added, hardly more fit to contend with it, in the fight for daily bread. In addition to the office that had been Pandora's gift by the hand of his well-meaning kinsman, Major Cowper, William had held for several years the virtual sinecure of the Commissioner of Bankrupts, at a salary of three hundred dollars a year. In the conviction that it

was dishonest to receive payment for work he could not do, he resigned the position and well-nigh beggared himself. Nothing, he affirmed, should tempt him to return to London, and his advisers acquiesced in the decision.

What followed, while it seems foreign to our ideas of independence, and even of manliness, was germane to the spirit and customs of the day. Patronage of men of letters was a practice handed down from the times of Cicero and Mæcenas. Literature was a polite profession which nobody expected to "pay." They who plied the pen did not live by it, and there were seldom wanting men whom appreciation of genius and art inclined to contribute to the encouragement of these. Desultory as Cowper's literary labours had been, they had yet established his right to be enrolled in the guild of poets and essayists. It had been calamitously proved that he was not fit to practise law, or to occupy any office of public trust. If—as was exceedingly doubtful—he were ever again competent to engage in any sort of work, it must be something he could do at home, and in sedulous retirement.

"My father," said a brilliant American writer, "left me money to buy bread with. Literature supplies the butter."

The Cowper clan, including Sir Thomas and Lady Hesketh, and, it is surmised, at the earnest suggestion of the latter, pledged the family to furnish a yearly sum that should ensure a decent lodging and daily bread to their unfortunate connection during a lifetime that was likely, in their opinion, to be short. Not one of them, it is evident, was sanguine in the hope that science and religion had so effectually routed the unclean spirit that there was no probability of his return to the swept and garnished house. In consideration of the different standards of literature as a self-supporting craft, set up at that era and in ours, we may reasonably side with those biographers who commend "the sweet and becoming thankfulness" with which William Cowper resigned himself to the position of perpetual pensioner upon the bounty of a younger brother; upon the uncle who had refused to give him his daughter in marriage, and sundry cousins, more or less beloved. He singles out one of these for honourable and grateful notice.

"The Major's behaviour to me after all he suffered in my abandoning his interest and my own in so miserable a manner, is a noble instance of generosity and true greatness of mind; and indeed I know no man in whom these qualities are more conspicuous. . . . I have great reason to be thankful I have lost none of my acquaintance but those whom I determined not to keep. I am sorry this class is so numerous."

The only "butter-money," upon which the recluse had any right to depend, was the rent of the Temple chambers, taken upon a long lease by him, and now sublet.

His brother engaged quiet lodgings for the convalescent in Huntingdon, and thither he removed on the twenty-second of June, 1765, accompanied by the servant who had had charge of him at Dr. Cotton's, and from whom no persuasions on the part of those who questioned the economy of the measure could induce Cowper to separate.

"He is the very mirror of fidelity and affection to his master," he wrote from Huntingdon to his legal friend Joseph Hill. "And, whereas the Turkish Spy says he kept no servant, because he would not have an enemy in his house, I hired mine, because I would have a friend. Men do not usually bestow these encomiums on their lackeys, nor do they usually deserve them, but I have had experience of mine, both in sickness and in health, and never saw his fellow."

In connection with the apparent extravagance of keeping this treasure—who, it must be owned, fully justified his master's praises,—I introduce an incident that belongs most fitly to this part of our story, although, chronologically, to a date a year later (1766). Cowper was then living with the Unwins, in the first real home he had had since his mother died.

His peace of mind, "flowing like a river," was ruffled to the depths by a letter from Ashley Cowper. The little man had reason to believe that "the family were not a little displeased at having learned that he kept a servant, and that he maintained a boy also, whom he had brought with him from St. Albans." The plain intimation was, Cowper admits, couched in "the gentlest terms, and such as he was sure to use." Still, the intelligence was not pleasant, nor, we may suppose, would the nephew have selected this one of his patrons as the medium through which it would have to reach him. He replied, respectfully, but firmly, to the effect that his peculiar needs demanded the care of this man, and that, although his expenses at Huntingdon had outrun his means, he had good hopes of retrenching

them sensibly, now that he was no longer a housekeeper but a boarder. Finding him resolute in the intention of retaining his attendant, Ashley Cowper spoke more specifically, but "as softly as he could."

"There was danger lest the offence taken by his relations should operate to the prejudice of his income."

At this juncture, John Cowper, ever ready alike in consolation and in action, stepped in, and went to the root of the matter. One of the aforesaid cousins—a colonel in the army, and a man of handsome means—"had been the mover of this storm."

"Finding me inflexible," William goes on to say to Lady Hesketh, "he had convened the family on the occasion; had recommended to them not to give to one who knew so little how to make a right use of their bounty, and declared, that for his own part he would not, and that he had accordingly withdrawn his contribution. My brother added, however, that my good friend, Sir Thomas, had stepped into his place, and made good the deficiency. . . . Being thus informed,—or, it seems now, misinformed,—you will not wonder, my dear, that I no longer regarded the Colonel as my friend, or that I have not inquired after him from that day to the present. But when, speaking of him, you express yourself thus,—'*Who, you know, has been so constantly your friend*,'—I feel myself more than reconciled to him; I feel a sincere affection for him, convinced

that he could not have acted toward me as my brother had heard, without your knowledge of it."

The truth, as afterward transpired, was that the Colonel's threat was uttered in earnest, but hastily, in the irritation of the moment; that, shamed, perhaps, by Sir Thomas Hesketh's generous promptness, or softened by sincere affection for his kinsman, he had retracted his purpose, and never returned to it.

The circumstance is unimportant to us, and the family flurry would be hardly worth jotting down, were it not for the interesting sequel given in another letter from the beneficiary to Lady Hesketh:

"I have a word or two more to say on the same subject. While this troublesome matter was in agitation, and I expected little less than to be abandoned by the family, I received an anonymous letter, in a hand utterly strange to me, by the post. It was conceived in the kindest and most benevolent terms imaginable, exhorting me not to distress myself with fears lest the threatened event should take place; for that, whatever deduction of my income might happen, the defect should be supplied by a person who loved me tenderly, and approved my conduct.

"I wish I knew who dictated this letter. I have seen, not long since, a style most excessively like it."

Southey thinks he may have suspected his cousin Harriet to be his benefactress, adding — "And from her — or her sister Theodora—no doubt it came."

Goldwin Smith utters our conviction more strongly: "He can scarcely have failed to guess that it came from Theodora."

Since Sir Thomas Hesketh had already openly pledged himself to make good all threatened deficiencies, it is extremely unlikely that the wife, with whom his relations were most tender and confidential, would take this clandestine course to reassure her cousin of her support. Her silence on the subject is almost positive proof that she was in her sister's confidence, and Cowper's forbearance in not pushing inquiries supports the conjecture.

For his sake we are thankful that he was not forced to owe his daily living to the woman who loved him so entirely and truly and hopelessly,—and whom he had half forgotten. We account the act, so delicately, yet so bravely done, a credit to humanity and a glory to her sex. After the proffer of aid which was not accepted because the need for it did not arise, the solitary woman shrinks back into the shade

from which she had emerged for one moment, and is not heard of again for ten years. When, at last, dreary twilight was settling upon the reason of her lover—once that, and always—and his own words were true in a sense he had not put into them in writing of her to her sister ;—"If we were to meet now, we should not know each other!"—she resigned to other hands the keeping of the priceless souvenirs of a day forever dead.

CHAPTER VII

LIFE IN HUNTINGDON—THE UNWINS

TO Cowper's residence in Huntingdon we owe the first of the many hymns that will endear him to Christian hearts in all ages. He had, it is true, written while yet at St. Albans a song of praise for his restoration to mental health, and the yet more blessed change that had come to his spiritual nature, but it is stiff and artificial beside the genuine poetry of the verses penned in the serene gratitude of a heart at peace with itself and in close communion with Him Who had turned darkness—and such darkness! into light. This hymn marked a new epoch in his experience and in religious song:

Far from the world, O Lord, I flee
From strife and tumult far;

From scenes where Satan wages still
His most successful war.

The calm retreat, the silent shade
With prayer and praise agree,
And seem, by Thy sweet bounty, made
For those who follow Thee.

There, if Thy Spirit touch the soul,
And grace her mean abode,
Oh, with what peace, and joy, and love
She communes with her God.

There, like the nightingale, she pours
Her solitary lays;
Nor asks a witness of her song
Nor thirsts for human praise.

Author and Guardian of my life,
Sweet Source of light divine!
And—(all harmonious names in one)
My Saviour! Thou art mine.

What thanks I owe Thee, and what love,
A boundless, endless store,
Shall echo through the realms above,
When time shall be no more.

The lines are lovingly familiar to thousands of pious souls. As we read them, memory sets them to the dear old tunes crooned above our cradles, and sung with joyous fervour in the assemblies of the saints in many lands and tongues;—majes-

tic *Ortonville;* quaint old *Mear,* springing, lark-like, from one cadenza to another to the noble crescendo of the third line; or "*Dundee's* wild, warbling measures";—sweet, tender and solemn reminiscences that are, of themselves, a gracious excuse for the repetition of the lyric here.

Furthermore,—as Southey justly observes,—"Because of the circumstances that gave rise to them, these poems belong properly to the personal history of the author." In harmony with the hymn, I quote from a letter to his kind relative, Major Cowper:

"As to my own personal condition, I am much happier than the day is long, and sunshine and candle-light alike see me perfectly contented. I get books in aboundance, a deal of comfortable leisure, and enjoy better health, I think, than for many years past. What is there wanting to make me happy? Nothing, if I can but be as thankful as I ought; and I trust that He who has bestowed so many blessings upon me will give me gratitude to crown them all."

As the shortening days of autumn abridged the rides and walks that were indispensable to comfort and health, the loneliness of his retreat began to tell upon his spirits. The "society of odd scrambling fellows like him-

self," who had diverted him upon first acquaintance, — " a North-country divine, very poor, but very good, and very happy," —a religious valetudinarian, who "drank nothing but water, and ate no flesh," and the one "gentleman, well-read and sensible," who had called upon him,—palled upon the intellectual palate. He felt the need of a real home, and affectionate, as well as intelligent, companionship. Mistaking the natural sense of loss and longing for falling-off in his love for Christ and disrelish for His service, he was on the verge of religious despondency, when the greatest blessing of his life was interposed to avert it.

Walking, solitary and thoughtful, in an avenue of trees after morning service one Sunday, he was accosted by a young man of pleasing address and countenance, who introduced himself as William Unwin, and a fellow-worshipper in the church Cowper had just quitted. The family lived in the neighbourhood, and had been silent witnesses of Cowper's regular attendance upon religious services, his reverent behaviour during these, and his apparent loneliness. The father was an elderly clergyman, who

eked out a slender income by preparing young men for the University of Cambridge. Cowper describes him as "a man of learning and good sense, and as simple as Parson Adams." Of Mrs. Unwin, who was many years her husband's junior, he says:

> "His wife has a very uncommon understanding, has read much, to excellent purpose, and is more polite than a duchess. The son, who belongs to Cambridge, is a most amiable young man, and the daughter quite of a piece with the rest of the family."

The appearance, in a dull country neighbourhood, of a bachelor, still under thirty-five, prepossessing in person and unsocial in habits, who set up a household of his own, and had a private valet, was a toothsome morsel of Huntingdon gossip. The Unwins had used their eyes and wits diligently, and probably had gleaned some items relative to the solitary's antecedents that stirred their sympathies in his behalf. William Unwin had wished to call upon him, but his father opposed the friendly design upon the ground that the newcomer evidently preferred his own society to any other. Something in the pensive, even dejected, air of the object of their kind so-

licitude and of neighbourhood curiosity, impelled him on this Sunday noon to disregard parental counsel and enter into conversation with the stranger. The talk turned, almost immediately, upon religious topics; Cowper learned that the young man was of his own inclination and sentiments, reading for orders, "being and having always been, sincere in his belief and love of the Gospel."

Young Unwin drank tea with his new friend that afternoon, and invited him cordially to visit at his father's house. This call introduced him to mother and daughter; he received and accepted an invitation to dinner, and a few days later "met Mrs. Unwin in the street and went home with her." His account of the interview is graphic, and especially interesting as conveying his earlier impressions of her whose influence was to be, thenceforward, greater than that of any other human creature in shaping and colouring his life.

"She and I walked together, near two hours, and had a conversation which did me more good than I should have received from an audience of the first prince in Europe. That woman is a blessing to me, and I never see her without being the better for her company.

I am treated in the family as if I were a near relation, and have been repeatedly invited to call upon them at all times. You know what a shy fellow I am. I cannot prevail with myself to make so much use of this privilege as I am sure they intend I should, but perhaps this awkwardness will wear off hereafter.

"It was my earnest request, before I left St. Albans, that wherever it might please Providence to dispose of me, I might meet with such an acquaintance as I find in Mrs. Unwin. . . .

"They see but little company, which suits me exactly. Go when I will, I find a house full of peace and cordiality in all its parts, and am sure to hear no scandal, but such discourse, instead of it, as we are all better for."

In this frame of mind, he accounted as a timely suggestion of "the good providence of God," the idea of taking the place in the Unwin household of a pupil-boarder who was leaving for the University. The state of Cowper's pecuniary affairs was embarrassing, steadfast as was his faith that his bread and water would be sure, and that those who loved the Lord should not lack any good thing. He was still in debt to Dr. Cotton, and the stipend he had counted upon to defray the obligation was collected with difficulty from the tenant who had succeeded him in his chambers. He jests to Hill on "the impertinence of entering

upon a man's premises and using them without paying for 'em," and in putting the claim into his hands sighs, "Poor toad! I leave him entirely to your mercy."

If his readiness to accept a pension, his surprise when "the Colonel" and Ashley Cowper demurred at his body-servant and riding-horse, and the airy lightness that postponed the discussion of money-matters to a more convenient season, remind us unpleasantly of Harold Skimpole, it is yet manifest, in many ways, that he was an honest debtor and sincerely distressed at the idea of defrauding another, or cramping a creditor who had trusted him. As fast as money came to him, he paid it out to those to whom it was lawfully due, and, with rueful humour, records that after three months in his bachelor-hall, he had "contrived, by the help of good management and a clear notion of economical affairs, to spend the income of a twelve-month."

Ever as ingenuous as a child in unburdening his mind to those he loved, he probably enlightened the Unwins fully as to his perplexities and his revenues, and their knowledge of these had something to do with the—to him—entirely satisfactory arrange-

ment entered upon between them. He refers the scheme and the successful execution of it to Divine guidance, and in this comfortable persuasion he was nearer right than those who carp at "leadings" and argue down "providential interpositions."

"Whoso will observe the wonderful providences of God, shall have wonderful providences to observe"—spake a wiser than those who look no farther than to second causes, and the natural processes of sowing and reaping, for explanation of the sublimest, as of the pettiest, enigmas of life.

Cowper writes in practical, sensible wise to Joseph Hill of the intended change:

"I find it impossible to proceed any longer in my present course without danger of bankruptcy. I have, therefore, entered into an agreement with the Rev. Mr. Unwin to lodge and board with him. The family are the most agreeable in the world. They live in a special good house, and in a very genteel way. They are all exactly what I could wish them to be, and I know I shall be as happy with them as I shall be on this side of the sun. I did not dream of the matter till about five days ago; but now the whole is settled. I shall transfer myself thither as soon as I have satisfied all demands upon me here."

An extract from a letter of a much later date confirms what has been said of the

Unwins' appreciation of his financial condition and his inaptness as a money-manager:

"I had not been ten months in the family when Mrs. Unwin generously offered me my place under her roof with all the same accommodation (and undertook to manage that matter with her husband,) at half the stipulated payment."

Professor Goldwin Smith says, analytically:

"The two great factors in Cowper's life were the malady that consigned him to poetic seclusion, and the conversion to Evangelicism, which gave him his inspiration and his theme."

With due respect to this honoured authority, I venture to cite as a third and scarcely minor influence, his domestication with the Unwins. Every principal event in his history and many of (apparently) secondary importance, show this man to have been of a singularly dependent nature, even womanish in the reaching out of mind and heart for some support that should protect and cherish, while upholding and directing. To borrow a nice, old-fashioned phrase, he needed *mothering*. His passionate grief for the mother whose image would have faded

from the recollection of most men under the heat and storms of fifty years, is but one proof of this ever-present, ever-clamorous need, not always comprehended by himself. Strong men, like Churchill and Lloyd, his Westminster boon-comrades, Joseph Hill, John Cowper, most of all, John Newton, recognised and used it as they thought best for him, or for what they wished to accomplish through him. Good, true, devout women of the finest strain felt and appreciated more justly that which set him apart from the average Englishman, and gave him an especial claim upon the mother-sex.

This, we assume, and most reasonably, is the keynote to an intimacy that has puzzled alike the writers who would think no evil, and such as think only evil, and that continually, of close friendships between men and women. Cowper was outspoken in the frank fearlessness of his feeling for Mrs. Unwin while her husband lived, and afterwards.

"Mrs. Unwin"—seven years older than he—"has almost a maternal affection for me, and I have something very like a filial one for her, and her son and I are brothers."

And again: "The lady in whose house he lived, was so excellent a person, and regarded him with a friendship so truly Christian, that he could almost fancy his own mother restored to life again, to compensate to him for all the friends he had lost, and all his connexions broken."

The Unwins belonged to that wing of "the Evangelicals," then turning the religious world upside down, that had remained within the fold of the Established Church, but held fellowship, in the unity of faith, with the more radical branch led by the Wesleys and Whitefield. In the conservative party, Martin Madan, Cowper's early friend and kinsman, was prominent. His sister, of the same way of thinking, married her cousin, Colonel Cowper, who was also a first cousin of William and John Cowper. In the correspondence opened between William and herself, soon after his incorporation into the Unwin family, we have a picture of the home-life that had become his.

"How do you pass your time?" Mrs. Cowper had asked, curious, no doubt, as to the country ways of getting rid of the short days and long evenings filled up for

her in London by godly visitors, church-services, and charitable works.

"As to amusements"—Cowper made haste to reply, —"I mean what the world calls such, we have none. The place indeed swarms with them, and cards and dancing are the professed business of almost all the 'gentle' inhabitants of Huntingdon. We refuse to take part in them, or to be accessories to this way of murdering our time, and by so doing have acquired the name of Methodists.

"Having told you how we do *not* spend our time, I will next say how we do. We breakfast, commonly, between eight and nine. Till eleven, we read either the Scriptures, or the sermons of some faithful preacher of those holy mysteries; at eleven, we attend divine service, which is performed here twice every day, and from twelve to three we separate, and amuse ourselves as we please. During that interval, I either read in my own apartment, or walk, or ride, or work in the garden. We seldom sit an hour after dinner, but, if the weather permits, adjourn to the garden, where, with Mrs. Unwin and her son, I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea-time. If it rains, or is too windy for walking, we either converse within-doors, or sing some hymn of Martin's" (Madan's) "Collection, and by the help of Mrs. Unwin's harpsichord, make up a tolerable concert, in which our hearts, I hope, are the best and most musical performers. After that we sally forth to walk in good earnest. Mrs. Unwin is a good walker, and we have generally travelled about four miles before we see home again. When the days are short, we make this excursion in the former part of the day, be-

tween church-time and dinner. At night we read, and converse, as before, 'till supper, and commonly finish the evening, either with hymns, or a sermon, and, last of all, the family are called to prayers.

"I need not tell you that such a life as this is consistent with the utmost cheerfulness. Accordingly we are all happy and dwell together in unity as brethren. . . .

"Blessed be the God of our salvation for such companions and for such a life,—above all for a heart to like it!"

To the practical, latter-day Christian, enjoined by conscience to be up and doing his little all for his generation, ever on the alert for opportunities to "make much of his dear Lord," by making the sum of human suffering less, and making the most of talents committed to him for improvement, and not for keeping only,—the saving clauses in this programme are the three hours of study or writing, the work in the garden, and the walk, during which the trio may have come into touch with humbler neighbours, or, perchance, with the triflers who danced and gamed away the hours which the Evangelicals believed that they were improving.

It softens the outline of the monastic routine to find Cowper intent upon gardening, and eager to collect seeds and cuttings.

"I study the arts of pruning, sowing and planting," he writes to Mr. Hill, "and enterprise everything in that way from melons down to cabbages. I have a large garden to display my abilities in; and were we nearer London, I might turn higgler, and serve your honour with cauliflowers and broccoli at the best hand."

The founder of the Franciscan order cultivated cabbages, and museums are radiant with missals and rich in carvings wrought by monastic brethren to fend off melancholia and hypochondria, in the intervals of masses and readings of religious homilies and the Lives of the Saints.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. UNWIN'S DEATH—JOHN NEWTON—LIFE AT OLNEY

THE name of the senior Unwin does not appear in Cowper's diary of occupations and recreations. That worthy gentleman, in his dual profession of clergyman and coach, had little leisure for "the calm retreat and silent shade" in which his boarder sat with great delight. While the *lecture pieuse* that succeeded breakfast proceeded, he was in his gig on the way to his Cambridge classes, or shut up in his study with a pupil. If his voice were not joined with the rest in "Madan's Collection," it was because he was too weary to play any rôle but that of listener. On Sundays, he mounted his horse at an early hour, to be in season for morning service in his remote living of Grimstone in Norfolk. We are surprised,

after Cowper's strictures upon the "gentle" folks' frivolities, to read that Mrs. Unwin's influence had removed her husband from his parish to Huntingdon. "She had liked neither the situation nor the society of that sequestered place." One at least of his brother-clergymen was severe in criticism of his non-residence in his cure of souls, pronouncing it "inconsistent with the piety of the Unwins to have encouraged such a dereliction." In yet harsher terms he interprets as "an evident dispensation" an event which "awefully removed the stay of the family in the very act of inconsistency."

On a Sunday morning early in July, 1767, when Cowper had been nearly two years with the Unwins, the old gentleman was thrown from his horse on his way to Grimstone, and fractured his skull. He was found in the road by some passers-by, picked up and carried into the nearest house, a mean cottage, about a mile from Huntingdon. His family was summoned, but his condition put all thought of removal out of the question, and they remained with him for five days, agonised witnesses of his sufferings until these were ended by death.

Cowper never wasted words in writing to Hill, and he told this story in few and graphic phrases:

"At nine o'clock on Sunday morning, he was in perfect health, and as likely to live twenty years as either of us, and before ten was stretched, speechless and senseless, upon a flock bed in a poor cottage where (it being impossible to remove him,) he died on Thursday evening. I heard his dying groans, the effect of great agony, for he was a strong man, and much convulsed in his last moments. The few short intervals of sense that were indulged him he spent in earnest prayer, and in expressions of a firm trust and confidence in the only Saviour.

"Our society will not break up, but we shall settle in some other place; where, is, at present, uncertain."

In September he authorised his legal friend to sell a hundred pounds' worth of certain stocks Hill had in keeping for him, stipulating that the sale should be kept secret from his family. "It would probably alarm their fears upon my account, and possibly once more awaken their resentment."

Two months later, he wrote of an afterthought characteristic of his tenderness of heart and conscience:

"It seems to me, 'though it did not occur to me at first, that you may be drawn into circumstances disagreeable to your delicacy by being laid under the restraint of

secrecy with respect to the sale of this money. I desire, therefore, that if any questions are asked about the manner in which my arrears to you have been discharged, you will declare it at once."

The monetary question was serious and pressing after the sudden removal of the "stay of the family." "The special good house" in Huntingdon must be given up, and the "genteel way" of living be exchanged for a more modest. William Unwin was now in orders and was, shortly afterward, appointed to a living in Essex. Miss Unwin was engaged to be married to a Yorkshire clergyman. The "society," reduced to two, was homeless, and at a loss in what direction to migrate.

At this date we meet, for the first time, in connection with William Cowper's, the name of a man who was, mentally and physically, and, it may be added, in moral force, so directly his opposite that the thought of the recognition on the part of either of the other as his counterpart is an anomaly in the history of celebrated friendships.

"I shall still, by God's leave, continue with Mrs. Unwin, whose behaviour to me has always been that of a mother to a son," said Cowper to his cousinly London corre-

spondent within a week after Mr. Unwin's death.

"We know not yet where we shall settle, but we trust that the Lord Whom we seek will go before us, and prepare a rest for us. We have employed our friends, Haweis, Dr. Conyers of Helmsley in Yorkshire, and Mr. Newton of Olney, to look out a place for us, but at present are entirely ignorant under which of the three we shall settle or whether under either.

"I have written to my Aunt Madan, to desire Martin to assist us with his inquiries. It is probable we shall stay here until Michaelmas."

As will be seen by the words "under which," all three of the men to whom the important change was referred were clergymen, and the ministry of an Evangelical shepherd was the paramount consideration with Mrs. Unwin and her adopted son. The widow's personal relationship with Rev. John Newton began only a few days after her husband's violent taking-off. He was, however, well known to her by reputation, and interested in her son through their common friend, Dr. Conyers.

The impression made by his call was so pleasant that before Newton left the house, the breaking-up of the family was discussed freely with him, and he had undertaken to look out a suitable abode for

them. Whatever report was rendered by Haweis and Conyers of their inquiries and the result of them, Newton's returns were speedy and emphatic. He had secured the very lodgings that they needed, and close to the Vicarage of Olney, occupied by himself, the curate, in the non-residence of the vicar. A gate in the garden-wall made the grounds equally accessible to both families. Some repairs must be made upon the house selected for his new friends, and should these not be finished by Michaelmas, the Vicarage was open to them as a temporary home.

Olney was, then, little better than a village, situated upon the sluggish Ouse, environed by flats, sodden and green after spring and autumn rains, and malarial under the summer suns. Besides their neighbours in the Vicarage, there were no people in the place above the rank of the shoemaker and the landlord of a public-house, both of whom applied for the tenement when Cowper and Mrs. Unwin vacated it, after many years of residence. Even then, Cowper owned that it was "an incommodious nook," and the town "abominably dirty." Goldwin Smith says that the house was

ORCHARD SIDE; COWPER'S HOME IN OLNEY FOR THIRTEEN YEARS

"dismal, prison-like, and tumble-down," and in the immediate vicinity of the worst part of the town. This last circumstance commended the situation especially to John Newton. That he was their nearest and only neighbour was, to the new tenants, and as long as he lived in Olney, an all-sufficient reason for preferring it to any other residence.

John Newton's antecedents are too widely known to require recapitulation here. The most prodigious feats and fortunes of a "penny-dreadful" are tame by comparison with the unvarnished facts of his career. Infidel, blasphemer, constant lover, and lawless son; sailor and deserter; slave and slaver; the learner at his Dissenting mother's knees of Scripture verses and religious hymns; the student of Euclid and Latin in an African desert, the sands for a blackboard, a tattered Horace, and a copy of the Vulgate, his only text-books;—finally, the humble convert of the Christ he had reviled—the tale, as told by himself, would fill twice the number of pages allotted to this volume. "In the end," says a biographer, "he was ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln, and threw himself

with the energy of a new-born apostle upon the irreligion and brutality of Olney." Another, that "Mr. Newton had

"'A frame of adamant, a soul of fire.'"

They had not invented the term "muscular Christianity" then, or he would have been the triumphant exponent of the school. The industries of the fenny district were lace-making and straw-work, even lads of eighteen plaiting straw for a living; the inhabitants were all ignorant, and all wretchedly poor.

John Newton had entered upon his charge in Olney in 1764. When Cowper and his motherly guardian joined him, the religious machinery he had set up was in full swing, his zeal in the operation of the same unabated. He interfused the soul of his newly found friend with as much of a portion of his fiery zeal as it would hold, and set him to work out of hand. A worse novitiate for the undertaking could hardly be imagined than the peaceful, contemplative existence of the two years Cowper had passed in Huntingdon. He had read much there, but done no intellectual labour. Meditation upon holy mysteries was a

sedative, not a tonic ; constant intercourse with the chosen few who, like himself, "had a heart for such a life" and were "consistently cheerful" throughout the length of its monotonous flow, had increased his native aversion to general society and fostered native delicacy of taste into fastidiousness. Mr. Newton had his opinions upon the semi-monastic habits of some of his brethren, and his opinions were resolute upon every subject. Mysticism was a synonym with him for indolence. He could not away with it. Where God had put a man, there was God's work for him to do, and plenty of it. He should be up and at it while the day lasted.

"If two angels came down from heaven to execute a divine command, and one was appointed to conduct an empire, and the other to sweep a street in it, they would feel no inclination to exchange employments," was one of his adages. In precept and in practice he taught that the duty of emperor and scavenger was action ! action ! action !

A man should undertake all that he could by any possibility accomplish, and do it with his might.

"A Christian should never plead spirituality for being a sloven. If he be but a shoe-cleaner, he should be the first in the parish."

With apothegms like these, he braced the lax nerves of his coadjutor; the sight of the warrior who slept in his armour, and fought all day, head erect, and nostrils quivering with the joy of the fray, put energy into the neophyte he had never dreamed of until now. Newton's stalwart personality got hold of the very soul of the recluse. While still learning his trade, as it were, he writes of a visit he had paid to St. Albans, a place, he says, which he "visited every day in thought." "The recollection of what passed there, and the consequences that followed it, fill my mind continually, and make the circumstances of a poor, transient, half-spent life so insipid and unaffecting that I have no heart to think or write much about them."

Under the impetus of this self-disgust, he plunged into parish work of the most unpleasing kind. Acting as a sub-curate to Newton, he spent much of the day in attendance upon sick cottagers, hearkening to the confessions of frightened, guilty

souls, abject in the face of approaching death, the witness, every hour, of squalid poverty he could not relieve, and degradation beyond redemption. Filth, rags, —boorishness that returned railing for blessing,—sickened him on every side, yet he held bravely to the line of march designated by his leader. He, whom the presence of strangers silenced and made awkward, trampled diffidence in the mire under his feet, and led prayer-meetings, exhorting, and "engaging" in audible petitions in the name of his hearers.

A reverend eulogist tells us that which makes the discharge of this self-imposed duty at once pitiable and heroic :

"I have heard him say, that when he expected to take the lead in social worship, his mind was always greatly agitated for some hours preceding. But his trepidation wholly subsided as soon as he began to speak in prayer ; and that timidity, which he invariably felt at every appearance before his fellow-creatures, gave place to an awful yet delightful consciousness of the presence of his Saviour."

It was the public-school hardening system over again, a good thing in its way, perhaps. Only there are boys *and* boys,

and men *and* men, and minds have not all the same poise.

Two, at least, of those who loved him, felt, painfully, the peril involved in the subversion of inborn tastes, and habits that were the growth of years. Long afterward, Lady Hesketh reminded her sister of the misgivings they had had while apprenticeship and practice were going on:

"To such a mind—such a tender mind—and to such a wounded, yet lively, imagination as our cousin's, I am persuaded that eternal praying and preaching were too much. Nor could it, I think, be otherwise. One only proof of this I will give you, which our cousin mentioned, a few days ago, in casual conversation. He was saying that for one or two summers he had found himself under the necessity of taking his walk in the middle of the day, which, he thought, had hurt him a good deal. 'But,' continued he, 'I could not help it, for it was when Mr. Newton was here, and we made it a rule to pass four days in the week together. We dined at one, and it was Mr. Newton's rule for tea to be on the table at four o'clock, for at six we broke up.'

"'Well, then,' said I, 'if you had your time to yourself after six, you would have good time for an evening's walk.'

'No,' said he. 'After six we had service or lecture, or something of that kind, that lasted until supper.'

"I made no reply, but could not, and cannot help thinking, they might have made a better use of a fine

summer's evening than by shutting themselves up to make long prayers.

"I hope I honour religion, and feel a reverence for religious persons, but I do think there is something too puritanical in all this. I do not mean to give you my sentiments upon this conduct generally, but only as it might affect our cousin. For him I do not think it could be either proper or wholesome."

There is true pathos in the sisters' tender mention of "our cousin," as if there were but one for them amid the many of their blood and name, and womanly wisdom in Harriet's fears and conclusion.

John Newton was a Greatheart, whose burning zeal and Christlike ministry to God's poor and needy warranted the enthusiastic devotion of his acolyte. His mistake—made in love—was in insisting upon putting such harness as his own upon Mr. Fearing, and shouting for the battle between him and Apollyon.

CHAPTER IX

QUIET LIFE AT OLNEY—DEATH OF JOHN COWPER —OLNEY HYMNS—THIRD ATTACK OF INSANITY

ANOTHER friend entertained views similar to Lady Hesketh's as to the propriety of the serious change in Cowper's habits and occupations. Joseph Hill, a popular lawyer, and, as we gather from the tone of Cowper's letters to him, more a man of the world than any other of his present associates, was not to be shaken in his love for the unordained curate by the slackening and cooling of the Olney correspondence. His invincible good humour under the lectures incorporated in Cowper's epistles, and his repeated proffers of pecuniary assistance, are tokens of friendship of the finest temper, and, more than the devotion of his religious intimates, show the singular attraction the semi-recluse had for those who had ever really known him.

COWPER'S GALLERY PEW IN OLNEY CHURCH

(SELECTED BECAUSE HE COULD NOT SEE THE PREACHER, OR BE SEEN BY HIM)

It is painful to see how Cowper's growing absorption in the round of labours appointed by his spiritual adviser withdrew him, gradually, from such people as his Cousin Harriet and her husband, and even from his Evangelical kinspeople, Mrs. Cowper and the Madans. Goldwin Smith quotes with sad sarcasm the epithet applied by one biographer to the daily and monthly routine of the Olney existence—"a decided course of Christian happiness." Hill's lip may have been wrung by a smile as caustic in reading the reply to his many invitations to his former chum to run up to the city as his guest, make a round of visits among his relations, and get a taste of some other air than that in which he was vegetating. The season was the winter of 1769—January or February. The one promenade possible for the joint households of Newton and Cowper was a gravel walk, thirty yards long, raised above the mud on each side of it, and on this it was Cowper's practice to tramp for a given time, dumb-bells in hand.

"It affords but indifferent scope to the locomotive faculty," he writes, "but it is all we have to move on for eight months of the year."

Beyond the walls of the Vicarage lay "a populous place, inhabited chiefly by the half-starved and the ragged of the earth," miserable in summer, utterly wretched in winter. Yet we know Cowper too well by now to question the sincerity of his declaration that he "prefers his home to any other spot of earth in the world."

He continues :

"My dear friend, I am obliged to you for your invitation ; but, being now long accustomed to retirement, which I was always fond of, I am more than ever unwilling to revisit those noisy and crowded scenes which I never loved, and which I now abhor. I remember you with all the friendship I ever professed, which is as much as I ever entertained for any man. But the strange and uncommon incidents of my life have given an entire new turn to my whole character and conduct, and rendered me incapable of receiving pleasure from the same employments and amusements of which I could readily partake in former days."

In the ensuing autumn he was summoned away from home and parish to stand at what was supposed to be the deathbed of his brother John. A deceitful rally of natural forces relieved William's anxiety for some weeks. Then came a relapse, and the elder brother hastened to Cambridge to find the patient in great agony of body,

and in mental depression best described by his remark:

"Brother, I seem to be marked out for misery. You know some people are so."

The positions of the two were now strangely reversed. William became the comforter:

"But that is not your case," he answered confidently. "You are marked out for mercy."

From that hour he never left his brother's side, except for his meals, and to get a few hours' sleep, until the spirit and body entered into rest. A small pamphlet, which the survivor was led by love for the departed, and a sincere desire for the glory of God and the edification of His saints, to indite while the facts were fresh in his mind is entitled *Adelphi.* It contains *A Sketch of the Character and an Account of the last illness of the late Rev. John Cowper, A.M., Fellow of Bennet College, Cambridge, who finished his Course with Joy, 20 March, 1770.*

The mortal struggle had lasted a whole month and four days. Then, "the Lord in Whose sight the death of His saints is precious, cut short his sufferings, and gave

him a speedy and peaceful departure," and the mourner returned to Olney to write letters announcing the affliction to distant friends and relatives, and, as I have said, to sit down to a detailed narrative of what he had witnessed while standing upon the uncertain ground dividing the living from the dead.

In the next twelvemonth Hill invited him to London at least three times with the same result as before. The third invitation was declined in a few lines:

"Believe me, dear friend, truly sensible of your invitation, 'though I do not accept it. *My peace of mind is of so delicate a constitution that the air of London will not agree with it.* You have my prayers—the only return I can make for your many acts of still-continued friendship."

The sentence I have italicised is ominous. Southey's comment upon this and other letters of the same date is of like spirit with Professor Goldwin Smith's:

"These may have been written in a frame of 'settled tranquillity and peace,' but it was a tranquillity that had rendered his feelings of friendship torpid; and if this was 'the only sunshine he ever enjoyed through the cloudy day of his afflicted life,' it was not the sunshine of a serene sky."

Mr. Greatheart Newton's panacea for a sorrowful heart and gloomy dreads was WORK. His disciple's docility and heroic self-sacrifice, in abandoning the study for the parochial round of cottage visitations and cottage prayer-meetings, had greatly endeared him to the superior. One biographer intimates that Newton discerned symptoms in his coadjutor's mien or talk that suggested the propriety of some change in his mode of life. With Greatheart, Life and Action were synonyms. His one concession to his weak brother's constitutional idiosyncrasy was that he gave him different work to do, and such as was more congenial to the natural bent of his mind. Cowper was a scholar and a poet. The little he had done in the literary arena before he fell in with Newton had given satisfactory evidence of both these facts. Newton was himself a man of learning, and no mean writer of sacred verse. Witness such lyrics as

> "How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
> In a believer's ear,"

and others in general use and justly esteemed by all branches of the Church mili-

tant. His admiration of Cowper's talents had kept pace with the profound affection the latter had the rare gift of inspiring in all his intimates. Therefore, asserts the chronicler referred to just now, "he wisely engaged him in a literary undertaking congenial with his taste, suited to his admirable talents, and, perhaps, more adapted to alleviate his distress than any other that could have been selected."

The obedient neophyte was bidden to soften the poignancy of his grief for the loss of his only brother, and to recuperate nervous forces spent in that racking month and four days in the valley of the shadow of death, by collaborating with Newton in the preparation of the *Olney Hymns*.

This collection, published by Newton after the failure of his colleague's mental health, was prefaced by an apology for the small size of the volume, and the expression of his reluctance to bring it out at all, "when he had so few of his friend's hymns to insert in the collection." For nearly half a century it was the favourite hymnal of Evangelical congregations in Great Britain and the United States. I have no hesitation in saying that Cowper's Olney hymns

—marked "C." in the earlier editions—won for their author a warmer abiding-place in the hearts of the devout worshippers in Establishment and Chapel than the more ambitious works that gave him a place in the foremost rank of English poets.

"There is a fountain filled with blood,"

and

"O, for a closer walk with God!"

have been translated into the language of every land where the standard of the Cross has been planted.

No one can read these and others of the collection without feeling sure that the author enjoyed writing them, and that, up to a certain period of time—or labour—the change of mental air and scene was rather beneficial than harmful. To this period belongs a hymn which, besides being the most virile in tone and helpful in spirit, contains more real poetry than any other penned by him then, or ever. Every stanza of

"God moves in a mysterious way"

is a gem of holy inspiration, and each has been a leaf of healing to the stricken soul.

The moved imagination of one who had lain in the pit and miry clay and had yet been made, by sustaining grace, to stand upright, searches for figures at once apt and familiar, with which to strengthen his afflicted brethren, tossed with tempests, and not comforted. God

> "plants His footsteps in the sea,
> And rides upon the storm."

The formation of the diamond in the hidden mine; dark clouds, growing big with mercy, to break in blessing upon the boding watchers' heads; the bitter bud that is to blossom into sweetness—are so many variations of the theme—"*Trust in the Lord, at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before Him: God is a refuge for us.*"

It is infinitely affecting to note that, as the labour of love becomes a task, with conscience as the whipper-in, the spirit is keyed to a lower pitch; the cry of the human becomes more distinct and plaintive.

> "Where is the blessedness I knew?"

indicates disease, and he casts about for a remedy.

"The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to cast it from Thy throne
And worship only Thee."

Introspection; analysis of hopes, of doubts, of heart-sinkings, of formalism in devotion—ah! it was a ghastly train that followed him into his study each day, and trooped about his bed at night, and would not down for prayer and fasting.

He toiled upon the Hymn-book until January, 1773, the glooms within the prison-like dwelling near the Vicarage heavier than the fogs lying low upon the Ouse without, and confining his view to the muddy streets and hideous row of opposite houses. Whatever Mr. Newton saw, he kept his own counsel and abated naught of his faith in the final efficacy of his catholicon. What more consoling than meditation upon the truth of God's Word? what more helpful than to utter forth the goodness of the Lord?

What Mrs. Unwin saw—and dreaded—we are not told, but we can guess from what she did when, in after-days, it fell to her to allot themes for him to write upon.

One day in January, Cowper threw down his pen, and "went mad again."

"With deplorable consistency," he refused to go to church or the prayer-meetings held in the "Great House"; he would neither pray himself nor have Mr. Newton pray with him, and could not be induced to set his foot in Mr. Newton's house. Then—perhaps Mrs. Unwin had known of it before—it came out that he had made an attempt upon his life as long ago as October, persuaded, Mr. Newton says, "through the power the enemy had of impressing his perturbed imagination, that it was the will of God, he should, after the example of Abraham, perform an expensive act of obedience, and offer, not a son, but himself."

Might not this have been a variation of the prayer deprecatory of

"The dearest idol I have known"?

The Dean of St. Paul's, the

"most ingenious of poets, the most subtle of divines, . . . whose reputation for learned sanctity had scarcely sufficed to shelter him from scandal *on the ground of his fantastic defence of suicide*, was familiar with the idea of Death, and greeted him as a welcome old friend whose face he was glad to look on long and closely."

Thus Edmund Gosse of William Cowper's great-grandfather.

"Mrs. Anne Cowper numbered among her ancestors Dr. Donne, the poet," Thomas Wright remarks. "It is pleasant to be able to connect the one poet with the other."

Pleasure that is darkly equivocal when we find Cowper, piteously unconscious of the force of the confession, writing to his cousin, Mrs. Bodham :

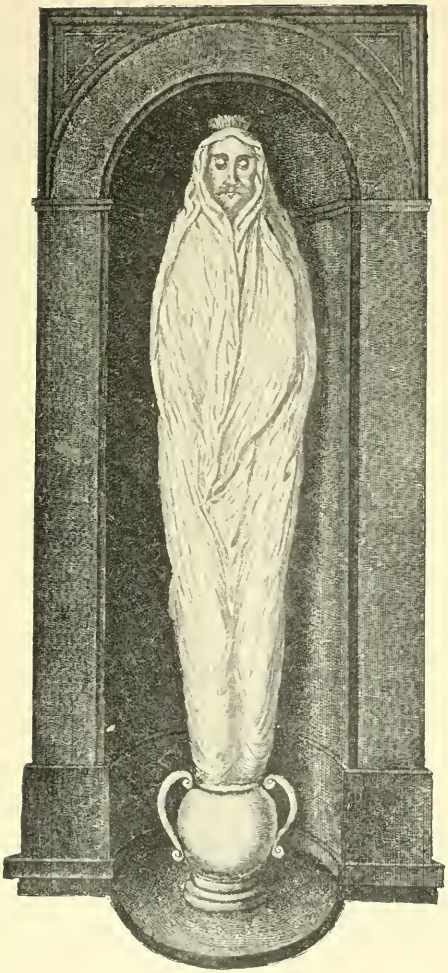
"There is in me more of the Donne than the Cowper ; and 'though I love all of both names, and have a thousand reasons to love those of my own name, yet I feel the bond of nature draws me vehemently to your side. I was thought, in the days of my childhood, much to resemble my mother ; and, in my natural temper, of which, at the age of fifty-eight I must be supposed to be a competent judge, can trace both her and my late uncle, your father. . . . Add to all this, I deal much in poetry, as did our venerable ancestor, the Dean of St. Paul's, and I think I shall have proved myself a Donne at all points."

Given to introspection as he was—this, too, in ignorant imitation of the Dean of St. Paul's, "whose life had been spent in examining Man in the crucible of his own alchemist fancy, anxious to preserve to the very last his powers of unflinching spiritual

observation,"—the doomed descendant descried nothing in his complacent inspection of the ancestral line to damp his satisfaction in the discovery that he was a "Donne at all points."

When he would have nothing more to do with Mr. Newton, and took it into his poor, ill-used brain that Mrs. Unwin hated him, the perplexed and despairing twain abandoned the theory of diabolical possession. Still, medical aid was not called in until, three months afterward, he agreed to spend a night in the Vicarage, and once there, stubbornly refused to go home. This sullen obstinacy almost lends a smack of humour to the situation when coupled with the Newtons' dismay. In the midst of it all, however—the inconvenience, expense, and distress involved in the entertainment of such a guest,—it must be admitted that their hospitality was without grudging, and that the patient was always "our dear Mr. Cowper, one sent by the Lord to Olney, where"—writes Mr. Newton—"he has been a blessing to many, a great blessing to myself."

In March, Dr. Cotton was consulted and advised blood-letting and certain drugs that



JOHN DONNE

(FROM OLD PRINT IN THE POSSESSION OF BEVERLY CHEW, ESQ., OF NEW YORK)

strengthened his body and made his insanity worse. For sixteen months, five of which were passed at the Vicarage, the patient never smiled. Then, Mr. Newton wrote with minuteness that testifies how close and affectionate was the watch kept upon his ward:

"Yesterday, as he was feeding the chickens,—for he is always busy if he can get out-of-doors—some little incident made him smile."

In a few days after this first glint of hope, Mrs. Unwin prevailed upon Cowper to return to his own house, and his long-suffering host heaved a grateful sigh.

"Upon the whole I have not been weary of my cross. Besides the submission I owe to the Lord, I can hardly do or suffer too much for such a friend. . . . He evidently grows better, though the main stress of his malady still continues. He has been hitherto almost exactly treading over again the dreary path he formerly trod at St. Albans. Some weeks before his deliverance there, he began to recover his attention which had long been absorbed and swallowed up in the depths of despair, so that he could amuse himself a little with other things. Into this state the Lord seems now to have brought him; so that, 'though he seems to think himself lost to hope, he can continually employ himself in gardening, and upon that subject will talk as freely as formerly, 'though he seldom notices other conversation; and we can per-

ceive almost daily that his attention to things about him increases."

His love of gardening and of dumb pets was what wise doctors nowadays call a "pointing of Nature." That much-abused Mother, turning, as it were, in despair, from the licensed fooling of those who presume to be her aides, prompts her afflicted child to adventure his own cure. Southey says that Cowper "understood his own case well enough to perceive that anything which would engage his attention without fatiguing it must be salutary."

He looked after cucumbers, cabbages, exotic myrtles, and indigenous stock-gilly-flowers, fed the poultry, and brought up by hand three young hares, "Puss, Tiny, and Bess," making careful notes of their habits and peculiarities. After his recovery he wrote their biographies,—the most enchanting memoirs of four-footed folk ever put upon paper for the delight of a dozen generations of bipeds.

"I believe my name is up about the country for preaching people mad," John Newton once wrote to a friend, with sorrowful *naïveté* at which we might, but cannot, smile.

"I suppose we have near a dozen" (in Olney) "in different degrees, disordered in their heads. This has been no small trial to me, and I have felt sometimes as I suppose David might feel when the Lord smote Uzzah for touching the ark. . . . I trust there is nothing in my preaching that tends to cast those down who ought to be comforted."

He might have enlarged the prayerful hope into a wish that his eyes might be opened to discern the wisdom of apportioning burdens to the bearers, and the folly of breaking stones upon the road with a sculptor's mallet.

CHAPTER X

THE FATAL DREAM—CONVALESCENCE—FIRST VOLUME OF POEMS

TO what may be called the Olney lunacy of our unhappy subject belongs the story of the Fatal Dream well told by Mr. Wright in his *Life of William Cowper.*

"One night, toward the end of February, he crossed the line that divided a life of hope from a life of despair. He had a Terrible Dream in which 'a Word' was spoken. What the dream was he does not tell us. Nor does he tell us the 'word,' 'though from his various references to it and his malady, we know its import. '*Actum est de te; periisti*' (It is all over with thee; thou hast perished) was the thought ever uppermost in Cowper's mind.

"It was revealed to him, as he thought, from heaven, that the God that made him, had doomed him to everlasting torment; that God had even regretted that He had given existence to him. So deeply, indeed, was this engrained in his mind that, for many years, he

never offered a prayer—did not even ask a blessing on his food; his argument being that he 'had no right to do so.'"

Had John Cowper lived a decade longer, he would probably have been a fellow-sufferer with his more imaginative brother. John's hallucination was the vision of a gypsy peddler who had prophesied that he would not outlive his thirtieth year.

"These fancies were," observed one writer, "but too surely indications of the same constitutional malady which so often embittered the existence of his brother."

And, still, not one of them—patients, physicians, pastor, or friend—recalled and set in its proper place the gruesome figure of John Donne, wrapped in his winding-sheet, his feet in the burial-urn,—the man who cried out with his last breath, as it would seem in visionary rapture, "I were miserable if I might not die,"—the divine who preached his own funeral sermon, and, when his mental powers were in their prime, defended suicide.

While Cowper resumed, to some extent, his correspondence with such friends as Hill and William Unwin, sixteen months from the beginning of his third attack of

dementia, two years elapsed before he was again in a normal state of mind.

Still obeying the beckoning finger of Nature, he passed many hours a day in the open air, building and glazing a miniature greenhouse, hardly larger than a modern Wardian case, and stocking it with pineapples.

"I am pleased with a frame of four lights, doubtful whether the few pines it contains will ever be worth a farthing; amuse myself with a greenhouse which Lord Bute could take upon his back and walk away with; and when I have paid it the accustomed visit and watered it, and given it air, I say to myself—'This is not mine. 'T is a plaything lent me for the present. I must leave it soon.'"

The morbid strain blended with everything he wrote or said.

"My mind had always a melancholy cast, and is like some pools I have seen, which, though filled with black and putrid water, will nevertheless, in a bright day, reflect the sunbeams from their surface."

Important things had come to pass in the small section of the outer world in which he was immediately interested, while he was lost to it.

His first note after his long silence has a reference to his uncle Ashley's recovery

from a serious illness. "Having suffered so much by nervous fevers myself I know how to congratulate him upon his recovery," is a curious passage, as indicating ignorance of the real cause of his own protracted invalidism. "Other distempers only batter the walls; but they creep silently into the citadel, and put the garrison to the sword."

Sir Thomas Hesketh's death drew him still farther out of the black shell of unwholesome self-absorption. The worthy Baronet's friendship for his wife's favourite cousin shows him to have been a man of generous sympathies and superior to petty jealousies.

"I knew," writes Cowper, "that I had a place in his affections, and from his own information, many years ago, a place in his will; but little thought that, after the lapse of so many years, I should still retain it. His remembrance of me, after so long a season of separation, has done me much honour and leaves me the more reason to regret his decease."

An old Westminster school-fellow, Thurlow, in whose company he used to visit No. 30 Southampton Row, had been made Lord Chancellor; a fire had burned up a dozen houses in Olney, and caused much

suffering among the poor thus made poorer; Mr. Newton's effort to lessen the chances of another conflagration by preventing the celebration of Guy Fawkes's day, when candles and torches often kindled the thatched roofs, was the occasion of a riot and a hubbub of threats against the curate and his house; the first edition of *Olney Hymns* was published and making its way slowly into favour with the churches. Lastly, and more important than all other changes put together, Mr. Newton had exchanged Olney for a London living.

"If I were in a condition to leave Olney, too, I certainly would not stay in it," Cowper aroused himself to write to Mrs. Newton, March 4, 1780, while the smart of the separation was still fresh.

"It is not attachment to the place that binds me here, but an unfitness for every other. I lived in it once, but now I am buried in it, and have no business with the world on the outside of my sepulchre. My appearance would startle them, and theirs would be shocking to me."

With the key of his after-life in our hand we see significance in another letter, penned after the spring weather had fairly opened, the jasmine and honeysuckle in his small

garden were in flower, and the hedges in the fields about Olney were white with "the May."

"I deal much in ink, but not such ink as is employed by poets and writers of essays. Mine is a harmless fluid, and guilty of no deceptions but such as may prevail without the least injury to the person imposed upon. I draw mountains, valleys, wood, and streams, and ducks and dabchicks. I admire them myself, and Mrs. Unwin admires them, and her praise and my praise, put together, are fame enough for me."

Every writer who has undertaken a biography of William Cowper has become his lover before the task was half done. His ingenuousness, his pain, and his patience, the vein of sportive humour darting across his darkest fancies like a fantastic zigzag of gold thread; the depth and constancy of his affections, the sweetness of his submission to reproof when dealt by one he loved—are so many anchors cast into our hearts. If other appeal to our sympathies were needed, it is made in the perception of the injury done to what Lady Hesketh tenderly terms—"the wounded and lively imagination of our cousin," by the heroic treatment resorted to for the cure of those wounds and the repression of that vivacity.

It costs us a conscious effort to do simple justice to one so thoroughly good, so really great as John Newton, while we dwell upon this dark age of his friend's experience. He meant so well, and loved his stricken colleague so fondly that we draw back from acceptance of the harsh citation of the Curate of Olney as the instrument of the pitiable ruin that overtook his devoted disciple. Yet we cannot shut our eyes to the truth that their relations nearly resembled those of confessor and penitent, and that to write to, or talk with, Mr. Newton was the signal for that introversion of the spiritual vision which is most to be dreaded in the religious hypochondriac. It was infinitely safer for Cowper to be drawing dabchicks for Mrs. Unwin's inspection than to be holding his heart in the hollow of his hand, as a magician pours the magic ink into his palm, and to shorten mental and spiritual sight with peering into the black pool.

At mid-summer of this same year (1780) he wrote to his ghostly father:

"I wonder that a sportive thought should ever knock at the door of my intellects, and still more that it should gain admittance. It is as if Harlequin should intrude

himself into the gloomy chamber where a corpse lies in state. His antic gesticulations would be unseasonable at any rate, but more especially so if they should distort the features of the mournful attendants with laughter.

"But the mind, long wearied with the sameness of a dull, dreary prospect, will gladly fix its eyes on anything that may make a little variety in its contemplations, 'though it was but a kitten playing with its tail."

A twentieth-century specialist in diseases of the mind would unhesitatingly prescribe the kitten, and lay stress upon friskiness as a desideratum. A hundred and almost a score years agone, a woman's love found out the scientist's secret, and womanly tact reduced it to practice.

As another winter drew near with the certain prospect of such miseries as a cessation of all gardening and country walks and such *al fresco* sights as hawthorn hedges, billowing fields of corn, hay-making, nest-building and swallow-flights,—that had diverted the convalescent's attention from the images in the aforementioned inky pool,—Mrs. Unwin led him on to fashion other things than scratchy drawings with the pen he was beginning once more to love. How gradually and how artfully he was lured into the belief that the notion

and the motion were his own, we are left to imagine for ourselves.

The letter to Mr. Newton, dated on the shortest day in the now gloomy year (Dec. 21, 1780) breaks the news that he is again writing poetry. Mr. Newton has told him an anecdote in his last letter, over which Cowper and Mrs. Unwin "sincerely laughed." Such natural amusement, and the telling of it, was nothing new by now to him who had recorded (in 1774) with tears of joy, the first smile after sixteen months of gloom. Mr. Newton had expressed to his correspondent his joyful confidence in the completeness of a recovery they all spoke of as "a deliverance from the power of the Adversary."

"Your sentiments with respect to me are exactly Mrs. Unwin's. She, like you, is perfectly sure of my deliverance, and often tells me so. I make but one answer, and sometimes none at all. That answer gives her no pleasure and would give you as little; therefore, at this time I suppress it. It is better, on every account, that those who interest themselves so deeply in that event should believe the certainty of it than that they should not. It is a comfort to them, at least, if it is none to me, and, as I could not if I would, so neither would I, if I could, deprive them of it. . . .

"At this season of the year and in this gloomy, un-

comfortable climate, it is no easy matter for the owner of a mind like mine to divert it from sad subjects, and fix it upon such as may administer to its amusement. Poetry, above all things, is useful to me in this respect. While I am held in pursuit of pretty images, or a pretty way of expressing them, I forget everything that is irksome, and, like a boy that plays truant, determine to avail myself of the present opportunity to be amused, and to put by the disagreeable recollection that I must, after all, go home and be whipped again.

"It will not be long, perhaps, before you will receive a poem called *The Progress of Error*. That will be succeeded by another, in due time, called *Truth*. Don't be alarmed! I ride Pegasus with a curb. He will never run away with me again. I have even convinced Mrs. Unwin that I can manage him, and make him stop when I please."

The barometer of his spirits rose steadily during the progress of the labour he once more delighted in. A letter to William Unwin, his first friend in the family, written on Christmas-eve, has the old ring of boyish fun.

"Your poor sister!—she has many good qualities, and upon some occasions gives proof of a good understanding. But as some people have no ear for music, so she has none for humour. Well,—if she cannot laugh at our jokes, we can, however, at her mistakes, and in this way she makes us ample amends for the disappointment. Mr. Powley is much like herself: if his wife overlooks the jest he will never be able to find it. They

were neither of them born to write epigrams or ballads, and I ought to be less mortified at the coldness with which they entertain my small sallies in the way of drollery, when I reflect that if Swift himself had had no other judges, he would never have found one admirer."

His private correspondence became again voluminous, and his letters on every subject are perfect of their kind. He makes comedies of the trivial happenings in Olney where, as he had once said, "occurrences were as scarce as cucumbers at Christmas"; he sends rhymed thanks for gifts of fish and oysters from London, and a doggerel inscription with a cucumber of his own raising; tells of long tramps through the snow in January; takes lively interest in the details of printing and publishing,—and on May 1, 1781, thus apprises William Unwin of the completion of the work that has kept his head above the black waters:

"On the press, and speedily will be published, in one volume, octavo, price three shillings—*Poems by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esqr.* You may suppose, by the size of the publication, that the greatest part of them have been long kept secret, because you, yourself, have never seen them. But the truth is that they are, most of them, except what you have in your possession, the produce of the last winter. Two-thirds of the compilation will be occupied by four pieces, the first of

which sprang up in the month of December, and the last of them in the month of March. They contain, I suppose, in all, about two thousand and five hundred lines, and are known, or to be known in due time, by the names of *Table Talk—The Progress of Error—Truth—Expostulation.* Mr. Newton writes a Preface, and Johnson is the publisher. . . . Johnson has heroically set all peradventures at defiance, and takes the whole charge upon himself. So out I come!"

Each of the two thousand and five hundred lines passed under Mr. Newton's eyes before it went to the press. Such as he objected to as savouring of unseemly levity, or as too "strong" for a refined Christian taste, were humbly expunged, or gratefully altered by the author.

Goldwin Smith's comment upon this censorship and the manner thereof is so replete with dry humour that I transcribe, and *sttb*scribe to, it:

"Newton would not have sanctioned any poetry which had not a distinctly religious object, and he received an assurance from the poet that the lively passages were introduced only as honey to the rim of the medicinal cup to commend its healing contents to the lips of a giddy world. The Rev. John Newton must have been exceedingly austere if he thought the quantity of honey used was excessive."

The publisher, on the other hand, insisted

that Mr. Newton's preface should be withdrawn, "not for containing anything offensively peculiar, but as being thought too pious for a world that grew more foolish and more careless as it grew older."

There are lines in the thin volume that will live while the literature they adorn is read. As might have been expected, the effect of the whole was that of drab-tinted didacticism. The chief good wrought by them was their leverage in rescuing their author from the morass of religious melancholy, and setting him upon the sunny levels of active employment and healthful association with his fellow-man.

Evangelical circles received the Poems doubtfully — when they received them at all—as being satirical where they should have been homiletical. Mr. Newton's preface might have ballasted the otherwise crazy shallop, but this Johnson could not foresee. Literary critics took the author more seriously than he wished to be taken, ignoring the poetic principle which our anointed eyes can discern here and there, and bestowing a sort of bored praise upon the moral precepts inculcated in the "dull sermon in indifferent verse." Moralists

like Franklin, and reformers like Cobden, approved the work and said as much; William Unwin wrote that his wife had laughed and cried over it; the Rev. William praised cordially, and dispraised discriminatingly, and the publisher saw enough that was promising in his careful perusal of the proof-sheets to move him to the expressed wish that the author would keep his pen busy.

The thistle-down of circumstance which was the germ of the second volume must be left for another chapter.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. UNWIN—LADY AUSTEN—JOHN GILPIN

SOUTHEY, the most voluminous, if not the most painstaking, of Cowper's biographers, denies doggedly that any thought of marriage ever entered into the mutual relations of the poet and Mrs. Unwin. The one argument he adduces in support of the assertion is the positive knowledge that "no such engagement was either known or suspected by Mr. Newton," and the extreme improbability that it could have been concealed from him had it existed.

Mr. Goldwin Smith voices the opinion of every other writer who has dealt with the subject, and of those who were personally cognizant of the romantic intimacy — in some respects unlike any other platonic affection that has furnished a theme for history:

"It seems clear, notwithstanding Southey's assertion to the contrary, that they at one time meditated marriage, possibly as a propitiation to the evil tongues which did not spare even this most innocent connexion, but they were prevented from fulfilling their intention by a return of Cowper's malady. They became companions for life. Cowper says they were as mother and son to each other; but Mrs. Unwin was only seven years older than he. To label their connexion would be impossible, and to try to do it would be a platitude. In his poems Cowper calls Mrs. Unwin 'Mary'; she seems always to have called him 'Mr. Cowper.' It is evident that her son, a strictly virtuous and religious man, never had the slightest misgiving about his mother's position."

The concise summing up of the case covers it so well that a minor chronicler may well be diffident in the thought of subjoining a reflection or two in confirmation of the truth thus established.

Mrs. Powley, Mrs. Unwin's only daughter, a modest, well-educated girl, as virtuous and religious as her brother, and fondly attached to her mother, became the wife of an Evangelical clergyman, strict to rigidity in his principles and prejudices, the last man of Mrs. Unwin's circle who would have condoned an association he regarded as questionable. Mrs. Powley disapproved of the money spent by her mother in bearing her part of the expense of "Orchard

Side"—the Olney home,—but "esteemed Cowper as a man," and, up to Mrs. Unwin's death, the relations between her and the Powleys continued affectionate and cordial.

John Newton and his wife were the constant companions of their next-door neighbours, and no thought of evil in that quarter, —or even the semblance of evil—seems to have entered their minds. Messages to and from Mrs. Unwin went back and forth in Cowper's letters to the husband and wife after their removal to London. The knowledge of Mrs. Unwin's vigilant guardianship over their beloved friend was the greatest comfort Newton had in his separation from the convalescent.

Newton's successor in the Olney curacy was Thomas Scott, afterwards extensively known through *Scott's Commentary of the Bible*, still a text-book in some theological seminaries, and a prime authority in family and Bible-class in the last generation. Although of Newton's school of thought, he was not attractive to Cowper, now supersensitive from the effects of his recent illness. With excellent judgment Newton did not oppose his patient's disinclination

to transfer to the new incumbent the confidence that had existed between pastor and pupil. He therefore introduced and commended Cowper to a dissenting minister in the near neighbourhood, the Rev. William Bull. The two affiliated at sight and forthwith became friends. "Mr. Bull is an honest man," was Cowper's first encomium. Subsequently he says, "he is a Dissenter, but a liberal one"; writes to him as "*Carissime Taurorum,*" invites him to smoke in his greenhouse whenever he will, borrows from and lends him books, and when Mr. Bull is ill, entreats him and his wife to "come to us, and Mrs. Unwin shall add her attentions and her skill to that of Mrs. Bull. We will give you broth to heal your bowels, and toasted rhubarb to strengthen them, and send you back as brisk and cheerful as we wish you to be always."

From the letters that passed freely between the dissenting divine and his friend it is plain that the former was not backward in priestly admonition when he thought it was needed.

"Both your advice and your manner of giving it are gentle and friendly, and like

vourself," writes Cowper in 1782, after Mr. Bull had urged upon him the duty of prayer.

This upright man and his "virtuous and religious" helpmeet were Mrs. Unwin's firm friends and frequent visitors.

Nothing is clearer than that the best people who witnessed the life led by the pair, "so singularly joined," as we say, saw nothing unnatural, much that was commendable, and perhaps more that was highly desirable, in the unlabellable connexion. They may have become so used to the sight of it as not to marvel with the exceeding admiration which is ours, over those sixteen months of heroic patience, of tenderness that was unspeakable, and faith in Heaven's mercy and the might of human love that was sublime,—during which God's earth had but one all-mastering interest for this delicately bred woman—the dumbly despairing maniac considered by all but herself as past cure. He would let no one else minister to his wants, yet persisted in the belief that she, too, was against him, and hated her hotly for it. Other women have gone to the gates of death, and some have passed joyfully through them, for

love's sake. Mary Unwin voluntarily entered hell and stayed there for a year-and-a-half upon the barest hope that hers might be the hand that would lead her best beloved forth, in God's good time.

What manner of person was the heroine of the unique love-story?

I write this page with her picture before me, a full-length portrait disfigured by the costume and the artistic taste of that day. She sits under a tree in the garden of the Olney Vicarage, the conventional broad-brimmed garden-hat upon her lap, one hand raised, pointing at nothing with a conventional index-finger. Her forehead is unusually high and broad; the eyes are large and gentle; the face a fine oval; the features are delicately moulded; the space between the brows bespeaks courage, and of a fine order. The portrait may, or may not, convey to us a just idea of William Cowper's housekeeper, his mother, his rescuing, sustaining, and inspiring angel. We pass from the contemplation to a longer study of another and a pen-picture—what may be called a half-length sketch—the fidelity of which is not open to question.

A woman's portrait of another woman is

seldom egregiously flattered unless painter and subject are more than merely good friends. When Harriet Hesketh sat down to give her impressions of Mary Unwin to her most confidential correspondent, she had known the mistress of the Olney retreat well for many weeks, having been continually in the society of her cousin and his hostess with the best possible advantages of studying the latter's character and manners. She evidently chooses her words with care:

"She is very far from grave. On the contrary she is cheerful and gay, and laughs *de bon cœur* upon the smallest provocation. Amidst all the little puritanical words which fall from her, *de temps en temps*, she seems to have by nature a great fund of gayety. Great indeed it must have been not to have been totally overcome by the close confinement in which she has lived, and the anxiety she must have undergone for one whom she certainly loves as well as one human being can love another. I will not say she idolises him, because that she would think wrong. But she certainly seems to possess the truest regard and affection for this excellent creature, and, as I before said, has, in the most literal sense of the words, no will, or shadow of inclination, but what is his. . . .

"When she speaks upon grave subjects, she does express herself with a puritanical tone, and in puritanical expressions, but on all other subjects she seems to have

a great disposition to cheerfulness and mirth, and, indeed, had she not, could not have gone through all she has. I must say, too, that she seems to be very well-read in the English poets, as appears by little quotations which she makes from time to time, and has a true taste for what is excellent in that way. There is something truly affectionate and sincere in her manner. No one can express more heartily than she does, her joy to have me at Olney ; and, as this must be for his sake, it is an additional proof of her regard and esteem for him."

Mr. Newton paid a visit to his former cure of souls pending the publication of the Poems, being the guest, while there, of Cowper and Mrs. Unwin, and bringing into their home, with the bracing breeziness of his personality, a flavour of London and life that made his departure a depressing regret.

"When you came, I determined as much as possible to be deaf to the suggestions of despair ; that if I could contribute but little to the pleasure of the opportunity, I might not dash it with unseasonable melancholy, and, like an instrument with a broken string, interrupt the harmony of the concert,"

said Cowper's first letter after his friend's return to London.

In the same epistle he remarks that "Mrs. Unwin suffered more upon the occasion than when you first took leave of Olney."

The melancholy of the reactionary quiet was brightened by the flutter of a fashionable woman across the front windows of the Unwin-Cowper house as a butterfly might stray into a work-room. She was the sister of a clergyman's wife resident at Clifton, the next village to Olney, and was now on a visit to her. The two had an errand at a shop opposite to Mrs. Unwin's, and Cowper, strolling, aimless and restless, up and down the parlour, chanced to see the stranger, and asked, interestedly, who she was.

Mrs. Unwin, surprised and pleased at the question, replied that she was Lady Austen, a baronet's widow, and lived in London. She was further gratified by Cowper's request that she would call the ladies in and invite them to tea. He put such force upon his shyness as to remain where he was until they entered, and to engage in conversation with Lady Austen, and, the visit over, escorted the sisters all the way to Clifton.

"She is a lively, agreeable woman; has seen much of the world, and accounts it a great simpleton—as it is," he wrote to Newton, some days afterward. "She

laughs, and makes laugh, and keeps up a conversation without seeming to labour at it."

A fortnight more took to London and to William Unwin's parsonage a lively description of a picnic to "the Spinnie," where the party dined in the root-house, Lady Austen's lackey and a boy from the Unwin house having "driven a wheelbarrowful of eatables and drinkables to the scene of our Fête Champetre."

Then the greenhouse is converted into a summer parlour,

"by far the pleasantest retreat in Olney. We eat, drink, and sleep where we always did; but here we spend all the rest of our time, and find that the sound of the wind in the trees, and the singing of birds are much more agreeable to our ears than the incessant barking of dogs and screaming of children. Not to mention the exchange of a sweet-smelling garden for the putrid exhalations of Silver End."

"The myrtles ranged before the windows made the most agreeable blind imaginable," and Lady Austen one of the most agreeable companions.

"A person who has seen much of the world and understands it well, has high spirits, a lively fancy and great readiness of conversation, introduces a sprightliness

into such a scene as this, which, if it was peaceful before, is not the worse for being a little enlivened. . . . The present curate's wife "—Mrs. Scott—"is a valuable person, but has a family of her own, and 'though a neighbour, is not a very near one."

Finally, William Unwin is presented in London to Lady Austen, who

"loves everything that has any connexion with your mother. She is, moreover, fond of Mr. Scott's preaching, wishes to be near her sister, and has set her heart upon one of the 'two mansions' that form the Unwin dwelling. It is to be repaired and fitted up with the furniture from her London house ; a door is to be opened in the garden wall, and the two households are to form one family, in effect."

As might have been foreseen, the beauty of the plan was marred by occasional misunderstandings : a capricious humour of Lady Austen's ; a confidential agreement between Cowper and Mrs. Unwin that "her vivacity was sometimes too much for them. Occasionally, perhaps, it might refresh and revive them, but it more frequently exhausted them." On the whole, however, and in spite of one decided "tiff," followed by a reconciliation between the ladies, ushered in by a flood of tears and a French embrace on the part of Lady Austen—all ran blithely for several months.

The other half of Orchard Side—"that part of our great building" (prison-like and tumble-down) "which is at present occupied by Dick Coleman, his wife, child, and a thousand rats"—was, after due consideration, pronounced untenable for a woman of fashion, however evangelically inclined. The Vicarage was not occupied by the Scotts, and Lady Austen set up her household gods there. "A smart, stone building, well-sashed, but much too good for the living," in Cowper's opinion, it was thronged with reminiscences of the Newtons and of their neighbour's perverse residence in it, during his lunacy. The field intervening between the garden-wall of Orchard Side and that of the Vicarage is known to this day as the "Guinea Field," Newton and Cowper having paid a guinea yearly for the right of way through it. A gate was cut in each wall, and a well-beaten footpath ran across the field from one to the other.

"Lady Austen and we pass our days alternately at each other's château," Cowper tells William Unwin, merrily. "In the morning I walk with one or the other of the ladies, and in the afternoon, wind

thread. Thus did Hercules, and thus probably did Samson, and thus do I."

He may have been holding a skein for the lively talker, one afternoon, when, observing him to be more grave and silent than common, she dashed into a rattling recital of the story of John Gilpin, one of the absurd stories that had amused her in her childhood. She told and acted it so well that Cowper lay awake that night laughing over it, and had worked it into a ballad by the time he arose in the morning.

"You tell me that John Gilpin made you laugh tears," wrote the author to William Unwin, "and that the ladies at Court are delighted with my Poems. Much good may they do them!"

The knowledge that he was thought of and with admiring pleasure beyond the horizon of Olney was, nevertheless, stimulus to fancy and incentive to action. The thrill and glow of the new springtime of his life was in every nerve and vein. And Lady Austen, if sometimes too vivacious to the sober pair in the summer or the winter parlour, was a strengthening cordial when taken at the right time and in the right way. She has the credit of having talked

OLNEY VICARAGE

over the disaster of the *Royal George* (which went down in a calm sea, with all on board) until the poet's imagination took fire and he produced the verses which have brought the story down to us. Encouraged —as she might well be—by the notable success of these ventures, she essayed a bolder.

"On her first settlement in our neighbourhood, I made it my particular business (for at that time I was not employed in writing, having published my first volume and not begun my second) to pay my devoirs to her ladyship every morning at eleven. Customs very soon become laws. I began *The Task*, for she was the lady who gave me the Sofa for a subject."

This quotation from a letter written in 1786 to Lady Hesketh will be continued presently. From other sources we have a glimpse of the scene of Lady Austen's memorable proposal — how important neither she nor her hearer suspected. During one of his morning visits, half-reclining on her sofa, a coquette's favourite throne in a day when high-backed chairs and backless stools were the seats in common use, she bantered Cowper upon his laziness. Why did he not fall to work upon something really worthy of his genius,—an epic, or a

sustained poem in blank verse, after the manner of other really great poets? Half-laughing, half-impatient, her guest replied that "he could not think of a subject."

"You should never be at a loss for subjects," she retorted. "They are to be found everywhere."

"Perhaps you can give me one?" as carelessly as he had spoken before.

She let her white hand fall upon the arm of her sofa.

"I can and I will. Write upon my Sofa."

Within the hour the first lines were penned:

"I sing The Sofa—I who lately sang
Faith, Hope and Charity. . . .
August and proud
Th' occasion, for the Fair commands the song."

CHAPTER XII

LADY AUSTEN'S FLIGHT—RENEWED CORRESPONDENCE WITH LADY HESKETH

"SO captivating was Lady Austen's society both to Cowper and Mrs. Unwin," says one record, "that these intimate neighbours might be almost said to make one family, as it became their custom to dine always together, alternately, in the houses of the two neighbours."

Cowper writes of the same period to William Unwin:

"From a scene of the most uninterrupted retirement, we have passed at once into a state of constant engagement. Not that our society is much multiplied. The addition of an individual has made all this difference."

We have heard of the luncheon at the Spinnie, the thread-winding, and the daily eleven-o'clock call. We have to thank her

who inspired *The Task* for the prettiest picture of a home-evening in all literature, and which was outlined and filled in from the life of the joint family in the winter succeeding the beginning of a poem that was to make the author, at last, famous.

"Now, stir the fire, and close the shutters fast ;
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa 'round,
And while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups
That cheer, but not inebriate, wait on each,—
So, let us welcome peaceful evening in.

. . . . . .

This folio of four pages, happy work !
Which not even critics criticise, that holds
Inquisitive attention while I read,
Fast-bound in chain of silence, which the fair,
'Though eloquent themselves, yet fear to break ;—
What is it but a map of busy life,
Its fluctuations and its vast concerns ?"

The picture is perfect in all its parts. We have Mrs. Unwin's parlour, which was also Cowper's study; the round central table, littered with books and papers, the shaded lamp drawn to his left elbow; his face, illuminated with thought, his quivering nostrils and shining eyes, as he reads to the spellbound women the pages written since last night's sitting. Without, fogs

and chill and the dead silence of a stagnant country-town have dominion over the flat landscape. Everything of warmth and light and cheer to be found in the wide and weary world is enfolded in the pulsing heart of this home.

What kept Lady Austen in Olney after the novelty of her new caprice wore off? The query will descend past our generation to others as inquisitive and as puzzled. She had lived in France and in London; she had money, plenty of society of her own sort, and liberty to travel and to dwell where she pleased. Cowper, afterwards a distinguished man, was known to but a small section of the then circumscribed literary world. If it pleased her humour to patronise a poet, and her vanity to captivate the shy genius who shunned the face of most men and all women save one, she paid dearly for the indulgence by giving up her town-house and town-friends to immure herself for a whole year in Olney.

That she was "an admirer of Mr. Scott as a preacher, and of your two humble servants now in the greenhouse, as the most agreeable creatures in the world," and had, at first sight, fallen violently in love

with William Unwin's mother, does not, in the eye of cool, reasonable lookers-on at the little drama, begin to account for the freak.

Her portrait, "in the character of Lavinia," gives us a really beautiful woman, whose sentimental languish of eyelids and lip-lines and head does not shut out the strong possibilities of coquetry discernible in mouth and eyes. She was a spoiled child of fortune who liked her own way, and would strain many points to get it. And still the marvel remains that she thought it worth her while to strain any one of them as far as the fenny regions of the Ouse and the muddy little town in which she folded her bright wings for all those months.

We are not stunned, therefore, and scarcely startled, by reading a letter to William Unwin, date of July 12, 1784, in which, after stating that his sister, Mrs. Powley, has left Olney that evening after a visit to her mother, and sends a message to her brother, he continues:

"You are going to Bristol. A lady, not long since our very near neighbour, is probably there; she was there very lately. If you should chance to fall into her

LADY AUSTEN IN THE CHARACTER OF LAVINIA

FROM A DRAWING BY W. HARVEY FROM THE ORIGINAL BY ROMNEY

company, remember, if you please, that we found the connexion on some accounts an inconvenience; that we do not wish to renew it, and conduct yourself accordingly. A character with which we spend all our time should be made on purpose for us. Too much, or too little, of any single ingredient spoils all. In the instance in question, the dissimilitude was too great not to be felt continually, and consequently made our intercourse unpleasant.

"We have reason, however, to believe that she has given up all thoughts of a return to Olney."

Hayley says in so many words that Lady Austen hoped that Cowper would marry her, and that Mrs. Unwin's jealousy of his liking for the newcomer broke off the connexion. This may be true so far as the wish and expectation of an offer of marriage from the engaging genius she had taken up went with the fascinating widow. That she cared to espouse an impecunious man of fifty-three, who had been thrice deranged, and would be prevented by a dread of a recurrence of the disorder from ever entering her world of gay society,—is preposterous. It is quite within the limits of likelihood that her thirst for admiration tempted her on to a flirtation with the recluse. Like all of her class, a conquest was a conquest, however undesirable the

victim. Cowper wrote charmingly complimentary lines to her; his conversation was entertaining and, to a woman of her sense and education, instructive, and he was on the high road to Fame, thanks, mainly, to her discovery of his abilities and the inspiration of her companionship. It was not a contemptible quarry that she hawked at, after all, and the chase was something out of the ordinary line of net-setting and beau-catching.

As a fellow-woman, I confess to a mischievous curiosity to know what changes flitted over the sparkling countenance of one of the eloquent Fair—

"Fast-bound in chain of silence"—

as the readings proceeded, until these lines were rendered in Cowper's best manner:

"And, witness, dear companion of my walks,
Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive
Fast-locked in mine, with pleasure such as love,
Confirmed by long experience of thy worth
And well-tried virtues, could alone inspire—
Witness a joy that thou hast doubled long.
Thou know'st my praise of Nature most sincere,
And that my raptures are not conjured up
To serve occasions of poetic pomp,
But genuine—and art partner of them all."

A sober résumé of the rise, progress, and fall of the Austen influence in Olney is given by Cowper in the confidential letter to Lady Hesketh from which quotation was made in the last chapter, and we have no reason to doubt that he told the whole truth—as far as it was known to him. Love-making and marriage were matters he had dismissed finally, and most sensibly, from his thoughts. If Lady Austen needed other proof of this than she must have had in the thorough understanding existing between the couple now in the twentieth year of their unique companionship, it is a pity she could not have read in this epistle to his best-beloved cousin how insidiously and surely *The Task* ousted from the poet's mind and heart her who had implanted the germ of the poem.

"Being once engaged in the work, I began to feel the inconvenience of my morning attendance" (*i. e.*, the eleven-o'clock visit to the "other house")—is a sharp and unintentionally cruel stroke.

"We had seldom breakfasted ourselves 'till ten, and the intervening hour was all the time that I could find in the whole day for writing, and occasionally it would happen that the half of that hour was all that I could

secure for that purpose. But there was no remedy. Long usage had made that which at first was optional, a point of good manners, and consequently of necessity, and I was forced to neglect *The Task*, to attend upon the Muse who had inspired the subject. But she has ill health, and before I had quite finished the work, was obliged to repair to Bristol.

"Thus, as I told you, my dear, the cause of the many interruptions that I mentioned, was removed, and now, except the Bull that I spoke of, we seldom have any company at all."

Wise Lady Austen! When she had become "the cause of the many interruptions," she found Olney damp and the "other house" incommodious for an invalid, and discreetly effaced herself.

Commentator Scott dispatched the tale of the rupture, which served Mrs. Scott and the Olney people for gossip for many a long day, in a scathing sentence:

"Who can be surprised that two women should be continually in the society of one man, and quarrel sooner or later with each other?"

How unjust the critical divine's judgment was in one particular case, however astute the conclusion drawn from observation of such triangular alliances in the general, we shall see, by and by.

Goldwin Smith has a graceful word of dismissal for the baronet's widow from the stage of our biography:

"Whatever the cause may have been, this bird of paradise, having alighted for a moment in Olney, took wing, and was seen no more."

In a letter to William Unwin, written a year after Lady Austen's flitting, Cowper says:

"I was in low spirits, yesterday, when your parcel came and raised them. Every proof of attention and regard to a man who lives in a vinegar-bottle is welcome from his friends on the outside of it. . . . I have had more comfort, far more comfort in the connexions I have found within the last twenty years than in the more numerous ones that I had before.

"(Memorandum.—The latter are almost all Unwins or Unwinisms.)

"You are entitled to my thanks also for the facetious engravings of *John Gilpin*. A serious poem is like a swan; it flies heavily, and never far. But a jest has the wings of a swallow that never tire, and that carry it into every nook and corner."

One copy was a carrier-pigeon, and, "homing," brought back to him "the days he had thought he should see no more." Lady Hesketh had lived much out of England for the past decade; the corre-

spondence between Cowper and herself had been interrupted for seven years, first by his third and protracted illness, and then by his steady conviction that he had no right to hold frequent communication with the partners of what he considered his days of worldliness and sin. *John Gilpin* galloped through the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, and could not escape the eyes of two women who read every line from "our cousin's" pen. Harriet's heart bounded with joy at "seeing that he could once more indulge a playful temper, and sport upon light subjects as he had been wont to do in former days." While the glad impulse was upon her, she wrote, recalling herself to him in the old strain of sisterly tenderness.

Cowper's heart broke bounds in the gush of love and memory thus evoked:

"We are all grown young again!" he cried, and rushed on in the old impetuous fashion to tell her what had come to him, what he had been doing, and where, and with whom, he had been living for a score of years, during which he had "recollected with the greatest pleasure a thousand scenes in which our two selves have formed the

whole of the drama." He paid a feeling tribute to Sir Thomas, and added that his generous provision for his widow "was the last, and the best proof he could give of a judgment that never deceived him when he would give himself leisure to consult it."

"I have lived these twenty years with Mrs. Unwin to whose affectionate care of me it is, under Providence, that I live at all. But I do not account myself happy in having been, for thirteen of those years, in a state of mind that has made all that care and attention necessary; an attention and a care that have injured her health, and which, had she not been uncommonly supported, must have brought her to the grave.

"I am delighted with what you tell me of my uncle's good health."

(So the "mushroom" had survived the storms and heats of another score of years!)

". . . Happy, for the most part, are parents who have daughters. I rejoice particularly in my uncle's felicity, who has three female descendants from his little person who leave him nothing to wish for upon that head.

"My dear cousin, dejection of spirits, which I suppose may have prevented many a man from becoming an author, made me one. I found constant employment necessary, and therefore take care to be constantly employed. Manual occupations do not engage the mind sufficiently, as I know by experience, having tried many. But composition, especially of verse, absorbs it, wholly.

I write, therefore, generally three hours in the morning, and in the evening, I transcribe. I read also, but less than I write, for I must have bodily exercise, and never pass a day without it."

Lady Hesketh was now a rich woman, and made, in her reply to this letter, inquiries as to her recovered relative's financial condition, inquiries couched in the most tactful, affectionate language, and which were answered gratefully. From this answer we learn that Mrs. Unwin's income doubled that of her adopted son. Also, that he had not "grown gray so much as that he had grown bald."

"No matter!"—the pen rattles on at the old boyish rate.

"There was more hair in the world than ever had the honour to belong to me. Accordingly, having found just enough to curl a little at my ears, and to intermix with a little of my own, that still hangs behind, I appear, if you see me in an afternoon, to have a very decent head-dress, not easily distinguished from my natural growth, which, being worn with a small bag, and a black riband about my neck, continues to me the charms of my youth, even on the verge of age.

"P. S. That the view I give you of myself may be complete, I add the two following items: That I am in debt to nobody, and that I grow fat."

CHAPTER XIII

GIFTS FROM "ANONYMOUS"—LADY HESKETH'S ARRIVAL IN OLNEY

NOT more than half-a-dozen letters had passed between the cousins after the renewal of their correspondence when Cowper writes of an anonymous letter he had received, full of kind words and enclosing a cheque for a handsome sum. After long poring over it, and careful comparison of the handwriting and style with other manuscripts, he struck upon the suspicion that his uncle Ashley Cowper may have been the nameless benefactor, and wrote to Lady Hesketh, asking if she were not of his opinion. This note of inquiry ends with, "Farewell, thou belovèd daughter of my belovèd anonymous uncle." Unfortunately for us, Lady Hesketh's letters have not been preserved. Their destruc-

tion was an irreparable loss to contemporaneous literature and biography. Her reply to this query, of whatever character, seems to have disabused Cowper's mind of the idea that he had his uncle to thank and to love for letter and gift. It did not further elucidate the mystery, for in three weeks more he wrote:

"Anonymous is come again. May God bless him, whosoever he may be, as I doubt not that He will.

"A Certain Person said on a certain occasion (and He never spake a word that failed) 'Whoso giveth you a cup of cold water in My name, shall, by no means, lose his reward.' Therefore, anonymous as he chooses to be upon earth, his name, I trust, will hereafter be found written in Heaven. But when great princes, or characters much superior to great princes, choose to be incognito it is a sin against decency and good manners to seem to know them. I, therefore, know nothing of Anonymous but that I love him heartily and with most abundant cause. Had I opportunity I would send you his letter, 'though, yourself excepted, I would indulge none with a sight of it. To confide it to your hands will be no violation of the secrecy that he has enjoined upon himself and consequently upon me. . . .

"He proceeds to tell me that, being lately in company where my last work was mentioned, mention was also made of my intended publication.* He informs me of the different sentiments of the company on that subject,

**A translation of Homer upon which he was then engaged.*

and expresses his own in terms the most encouraging, but adds, that having left the company and shut himself up in his chamber, an apprehension seized him lest, perhaps the world should not enter into my views of the matter, and the work should seem to come short of the success that I hope for, the mortification might prove too much for my health, yet thinks that, even in that case, I may comfort myself by adverting to similar cases of failure where the writer's genius would have insured success, if anything could have insured it, and alludes in particular to the fate and fortune of the *Paradise Lost.*

"In the last place he gives his attention to my circumstances, takes the kindest notice of their narrowness, and makes me a present of an annuity of five hundred pounds. In a P. S. he tells me, a small parcel will set off by the Wellingborough coach on Tuesday next, which he hopes will arrive safe.

"I have given you the bones, but the benignity and affection which is the marrow of those bones, in so short an abridgment, I could not give you."

The mysterious parcel arrived duly, and is thus acknowledged:

"*Olney, Jan. 31, 1786.*

"It is very pleasant, my dearest cousin, to receive a present so delicately conveyed as that which I received so lately from Anonymous. But it is also very painful to have nobody to thank for it.

"I find myself, therefore, driven by stress of necessity, to the following resolution, viz. that I will constitute you my Thank-receiver-general for whatsoever gift I shall receive hereafter, as well as for those that I have

already received from a nameless benefactor. I, therefore, thank you, my cousin, for a most elegant present, including the most elegant compliment that ever poet was honoured with ; for a snuff-box of tortoise-shell, with a beautiful landscape on the lid of it, glazed with crystal, having the figures of three hares in the foreground, and inscribed above with these words,—*The Peasant's Nest,* and below with these,—*Tiny, Puss and Bess.*

"For all and every one of these, I thank you, and, also, for standing proxy on this occasion. Nor must I forget to thank you, that so soon after I had sent you the first letter of Anonymous, I received another in the same hand.

"There ! now I am a little easier."

After the receipt of another letter, with the promise of a second token of remembrance to be sent by coach, Cowper writes in a graver strain. There is an accent so nearly approaching reverence in the fervour of his gratitude that one might almost suspect that he had penetrated the secret of the disguise contrived between the sisters. He stands, with bared and bowed head, before the veiled Anonyma, dumb in the dawning conception of a love that had borne everything and expected nothing.

"Who is there in the world that has, or thinks he has, reason to love me to the degree that he does? But it is no matter. He chooses to be unknown, and his choice is, and ever shall be, so sacred to me, that if his

name lay on the table before me, reversed, I would not turn the paper about that I might read it. Much as it would gratify me to thank him, I would turn my eyes away from the forbidden discovery. I long to assure him that these same eyes, concerning which he expresses such kind apprehensions, lest they should suffer by this laborious undertaking, are as well as I could expect them to be if I were never to touch either book or pen. . . .

"'Though I believe you, my dear, to be in full possession of all this mystery, you shall never know me, while you live, either directly, or by hints of any sort, to attempt to extort, or steal the secret from you."

He had at least one good reason for suspecting his correspondent's knowledge of, if not complicity in, the gracious and beautiful mystery. One of the anonymous letters referred to a poem, seen in manuscript by Lady Hesketh, and by no one else, except the author. As it had not been published when the letter was written, duller wits than Cowper's could have laid hold of the clue thus inadvertently cast out.

"It is possible," he wrote, still guardedly and reverently, "that between you and Anonymous there may be some communication. If that should be the case, I will beg you just to signify to him, as opportunity may occur, the safe arrival of his most acceptable present, and my most grateful sense of it."

After reading all this, we do not need

Southey's deduction to rivet our own conviction:

"Who but Theodora could it have been who was thus intimate with Lady Hesketh, and felt this deep and lively and constant regard for Cowper?"

What Mrs. Unwin thought on the subject,—and she had views of her own upon all that related to the man who could never be her lover or husband, yet was more than friend or son,—we are left to conjecture. While the cousins' letters flew back and forth, fast and faster, as the project of Lady Hesketh's removal to Olney blossomed into a certain hope, she "sits knitting my stockings at my elbow, with an industry worthy of Penelope herself. You will not think this an exaggeration when I tell you that I have not bought a pair these twenty years, either of thread, silk or worsted."

Complete refutation of Lady Austen's declaration that Mrs. Unwin's jealousy of the poet's intimacy with their charming neighbour caused the rupture between them, is found in Mrs. Unwin's eager seconding of Cowper's invitation to his cousin to make the third in their home-group.

"You are the first person for whom I

have heard Mrs. Unwin express such feelings as she does for you," Cowper said, when preparations for Lady Hesketh's coming were at their height.

"She is not profuse in her professions, nor forward to enter into treaties of friendship with new faces, but when her friendship is once engaged, it may be confided in even unto death. She loves you, already, and how much more will she love you before this time twelvemonth! I have, indeed, endeavoured to describe you to her, but perfectly as I have you by heart, I am sensible that my picture cannot do you justice. I never saw one that did. Be what you may, you are much beloved, and will be so at Olney, and Mrs. Unwin expects you with the pleasure that one feels at the return of a long absent, dear relation; that is to say, with a pleasure such as mine. She sends you her warmest affections."

The glory of an English May was abroad in the country, the season he loved as heartily as he hated January.

"There will be roses, and jasmine and honeysuckles, and shady walks, and cool alcoves, and you will partake them with us. I want you to have a share of everything that is delightful here, and cannot bear that the advance of the season should steal away a single pleasure before you can come to enjoy it."

His letters at this date fairly sparkle with the new happiness of communion, after long abstinence, with one of his own blood.

He dreams of the meeting with his favourite kinswoman, dearer than any sister could have been—and he had never known a sister's love.

"Sitting in our summer-house, I saw you coming towards me. With inexpressible pleasure, I sprang to meet you, caught you in my arms, and said: 'Oh, my precious, precious cousin! may God make me thankful that I see thy face again!' Now, this was a dream, and no dream; it was only a shadow while it lasted, but if we both live, and live to meet, it will be realised hereafter."

He had already told her, and reiterated it, that he was more than happy in the success of his literary ventures.

"My heart is as light as a bird on the subject of Homer. . . . To write was necessary for me. I undertook an honourable task, and with honourable intentions. It served me for more than two years as an amusement, and as such, was of infinite service to my spirits. . . . Fame is neither my meat, nor my drink. I lived fifty years without it, and, should I live fifty more, and get to heaven at last, then I shall not want it."

"I am now revising the *Iliad*. . . . How glad shall I be to read it over, in an evening, book by book, as fast as I settle the copy, to you and to Mrs. Unwin! She has been my touchstone always, and without reference to her taste and judgment I have printed nothing. With one of you at each elbow, I should think myself the happiest of poets."

After much tribulation in the matter of house-hunting, and numberless delays consequent upon the defection of coachmakers, carpenters, and carriers, Lady Hesketh, her furniture, her carriage and horses,—a novelty in the humble neighbourhood,—were taken to Olney by the middle of June. Cowper's delight in preparing for, and awaiting, her coming was tremulous to ecstasy, and, as might have been expected, was succeeded by depression.

"My spirits broke down with me under the pressure of too much joy," he wrote to William Unwin, "and left me flat, or rather melancholy, throughout the day, to a degree that was mortifying to myself, and alarming to her. But I have made amends for this failure since, and in point of cheerfulness, have far exceeded her expectations, for she knew that sable had been my suit for years. . . .

"She has been with us near a fortnight. She pleases everybody, and is pleased in her turn, with everything she finds at Olney ; is always cheerful and sweet-tempered, and knows no pleasure equal to that of communicating pleasure to us, and to all around her. This disposition in her is the more comfortable, because it is not the humour of the day, a sudden flash of benevolence and good spirits, occasioned merely by a change of scene, but it is her natural turn, and has governed all her conduct ever since I knew her first. We are consequently happy in her society, and shall be happier still to have you to partake with us in our joy. . . .

"I am fond of the sound of bells, but was never more pleased with those of Olney than when they rang her into her new habitation. It is a compliment that our performers upon these instruments have never paid to any other personage (Lord Dartmouth excepted) since we knew the town. In short, she is, as she ever was, my pride and my joy, and I am delighted with everything that means to do her honour."

He told the same tale, in a calmer tone, to John Newton, when the excitement of the arrival had subsided.

"I feel myself well content to say, without any enlargement on the subject, that an inquirer after happiness might travel far, and not find a happier trio than meet every day either in our parlour, or in the parlour at the Vicarage."

Lady Hesketh had taken the quarters vacated by Lady Austen's flitting. My fellow-lovers of romance in real life will find it easy to forgive me for transcribing here two extracts, the last I shall offer, from the very few letters of Lady Hesketh that have escaped the unfortunate destruction lamented awhile ago. Both, I am thankful to say, are to her sister Theodora, and are strong circumstantial evidence,—if it were needed,—that she kept Anonyma fully acquainted with every particular of her present life.

"I am sure a little variety of company and a little cheerful society is necessary to him. Mrs. Unwin seems quite to think so, and expresses the greatest satisfaction that he has, within the last year, consented to mix a little more with human creatures. As to her, she does seem, in real truth, to have no will left on earth but for his good, and literally no will but his. How she has supported (as she has done!) the constant attendance day and night which she has gone through for the last thirteen years, is to me, I confess, incredible. And, in justice to her, I must say, she does it all with an ease that relieves you from any idea of its being a state of sufferance. She speaks of him in the highest terms; and by her astonishing management, he is never mentioned in Olney but with the highest respect and veneration."

And again:

"Our friend delights in a large table and a large chair. There are two of the latter comforts in my parlour. I am sorry to say that he and I always spread ourselves out on them, leaving poor Mrs. Unwin to find all the comfort she can in a small one, half as high again as ours, and considerably harder than marble. However, she protests it is 'what she likes'; that she 'prefers a high chair to a low one, and a hard to a soft one,'—and I hope she is sincere. Indeed I am persuaded she is.

"Her constant employment is knitting stockings, which she does with the finest needles I ever saw;—and very nice they are,—the stockings, I mean. Our cousin has not, for many years, worn other than those of her manufacture. She knits silk, cotton, and worsted.

"She sits knitting on one side of the table in her spectacles, and he, on the other, reading to her (when he is not employed in writing) in his. In winter, his morning studies are always carried on in a room by himself; but as his evenings are usually spent in the winter in transcribing, he, usually, I find, does them *vis-à-vis* to Mrs. Unwin. At this time of the year, he writes always in the morning in what he calls his 'boudoir.' This is in the garden; it has a door and a window; just holds a small table with a desk and two chairs; but 'though there are two chairs, and two persons might be contained therein, it would be with a degree of difficulty. For this cause—as I make a point of not disturbing a poet in his retreat,—I go not there."

Both of these extracts were found in the parcel of poems and other MSS. treasured by Theodora Cowper and published after her death in the volume of *Poems: Early Productions, etc.*

COWPER'S SUMMER HOUSE, OR "BOUDOIR"

CHAPTER XIV

MR. NEWTON'S REPROOF OF "WORLDLY GAYETIES"—REMOVAL TO WESTON LODGE

IN a letter dated August 5, 1786, Cowper wrote to Newton of other and important projected changes in the Olney household:

"You have heard of our proposed removal. The house that is to receive us is in a state of preparation, and when finished, will be smarter and more commodious than our present abode. But the circumstance that chiefly recommends it is its situation. Long confinement in the winter, and indeed for the most part in the autumn, too, has hurt us both. . . . Had I been confined in the Tower, the battlements would have furnished me with a larger space. You say well that there was a time when I was happy at Olney, and I am now as happy at Olney as I expect to be anywhere without the presence of God. Change of situation is with me not otherwise an object than as both Mrs. Unwin's health and mine may happen to be concerned in it. A fever of the slow and spirit-oppressing kind seems to belong

to all except the natives who have dwelt in Olney many years, and the natives have putrid fevers. . . .

"I no more expect happiness at Weston than here, or than I should expect it, in company with felons and outlaws, in the hold of a ballast-lighter. . . .

"In the mean time I embrace with alacrity every alleviation of my case, and with the more alacrity, because whatever proves a relief to my distress, is a cordial to Mrs. Unwin, whose sympathy with me, through the whole of it has been such, that, despair excepted, her burden has been as heavy as mine. Lady Hesketh, by her affectionate behaviour, the cheerfulness of her conversation, and the constant sweetness of her temper, has cheered us both ; and Mrs. Unwin not less than me. By her help we get change of air and scene, though still resident at Olney ; and by her means have intercourse with some families in this country, with whom, but for her, we could never have been acquainted."

The county-families were the Throckmortons of Weston Hall, distant about a mile and a half from Olney, and "the Wrightes, the Chesters, and other people of position and fashion," who were attracted to Orchard Side by the growing fame of the author of *The Task* and Lady Hesketh's personal attractions.

The new house was to be Weston Lodge, selected by Lady Hesketh and set in order under her supervision, as a more salubrious

abode for her often-ailing kinsman than "the cheerless, prison-like edifice" in the village. As Cowper put it in another letter, "She stoops to Olney, lifts us from our swamp, and sets us down on the elevated ground of Weston Underwood."

The prospect of the flitting and the society of his cousin wrought marvellous changes in his mood. One significant token of the improvement was his resumption, of his own accord, of the habit of saying grace at dinner; another, his acceptance of invitations to call upon, and to dine with, the Throckmortons. The thought of living upon the border of pleasure-grounds in which he might ramble in winter as in summer; the sight of the noble park outlying the gardens of Weston Hall and the Lodge, where he might live during the daylight hours, dreaming, reading, or writing, as the humour seized him, and the roomy cheerfulness of the proposed dwelling, a "mansion" in his eyes, were the best tonics the ingenuity of affection could have devised.

Preparations for removal went on apace. The "famous parlour" was dismantled, and, we may be sure, not without many a

twinge of regret, and even an occasional misgiving. As the visitor of to-day sees it, it is a plain, square room of moderate size (about thirteen feet from wall to wall). Two windows open upon the street, now neatly paved, and no longer dismal. One looks through them upon the windows of the draper's shop visited by Lady Austen on the memorable afternoon of Cowper's first interview with her. His table and chair used to stand before the window nearest the fireplace. "I write upon a card-table; we breakfast, dine, and sup upon a card-table," he wrote to Newton. "It still holds possession of its function without a rival."

Mr. Wright adds:

"In this room Cowper read aloud of an evening while the ladies plied their crochet-hooks or knitting-needles; here he wrote both letters and poetry; in this room his hares gambolled, his linnets twittered, and his dog Mungo defied the thunder and lightning. Here, when there was no other means of getting exercise, he and Mrs. Unwin played battledoor and shuttlecock, while Lady Austen fingered the harpsichord; here he was told the story of John Gilpin; in this room he read the ballad at the breakfast-table."

Next to the parlour, the most interesting spot upon the now-deserted premises is the

tiny summer-house, in which a man of ordinary stature cannot stand erect. It is scarcely larger than a sedan-chair; a worm-eaten bench fills one side, a window another, the rickety door a third. A square stand, with a drawer in it, is by the window, and upon it a grotesque wig-block, brown with years, the identical form upon which Cowper's wig used to be shaped and dressed. In the floor is a trap-door, hiding a hole where were kept Mr. Bull's pipes and tobacco, ready for his next visit to his friend and crony.

The greenhouse has disappeared, and the gate in the wall has been built up, as has that in the wall of the Vicarage garden, but the walks of both gardens are lined with the dear old-fashioned flowers that flourished here in Newton's and in Cowper's day; the boxwood hedge encompassing the wee cupboard of a "boudoir" may have sprung from roots which occupied the self-same space then. The place is redolent with memories, and each memory is a romance.

The happy flurry of getting the "mansion" ready, and the pleasing pain of unsettling the old home, were rudely interrupted by a communication from Mr. Newton.

We get a history of the whole disagreeable affair from a letter written to William Unwin after the Olneyites had had time to view the subject from all sides.

"This day three weeks your mother received a letter from Mr. Newton which she has not answered, nor is likely to answer hereafter. It gave us both much concern, but her more than me; I suppose my mind being necessarily occupied in my work, I had not so much leisure to browse upon the wormwood that it contained. The purport of it is a direct accusation of me, and of her an accusation implied, that we have both deviated into forbidden paths, and lead a life unbecoming the Gospel; that many of my friends in London are grieved and the simple people in Olney astonished; that he never so much doubted of my restoration to Christian privileges as now; in short, that I converse too much with people of the world, and find too much pleasure in doing so. He concludes with putting your mother in mind that there is still an intercourse between London and Olney, by which he means to insinuate that we cannot offend against the decorum that we are bound to observe, but the news of it will most certainly be conveyed to him. . . . We do not at all doubt it. We never knew a lie hatched at Olney that waited long for a bearer. . . .

"What are the deeds for which we have been represented as thus criminal? Our present course of life differs in nothing from that we have both held these thirteen years except that, after great civilities shown us, and many advances made on the part of the 'Throcks,' we visit them. We visit also at Gayhurst. That we

have frequently taken airings with my cousin in her carriage, and that I have sometimes taken a walk with her on a Sunday evening, and sometimes by myself; which, however, your mother has never done. These are the only novelties in our practice; and, if by these procedures, so inoffensive in themselves, we yet give offence, offence must needs be given. God and our own consciences acquit us, and we acknowledge no other judges.

"The two families with whom we have kicked up this 'astonishing' intercourse are as harmless in their conversation as can be found anywhere. And as to my poor cousin, the only crime that she is guilty of against the people of Olney is that she has fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and administered comfort to the sick. Except, indeed, that by her great kindness, she has given us a little lift in point of condition and circumstances, and has thereby excited envy in some who have not the knack of rejoicing in the prosperity of others. And this I take to be the root of the matter.

"My dear William, I do not know that I should have tested your nerves and spirits with this disagreeable theme, had not Mr. Newton talked of applying to you for particulars. . . . You are now qualified to inform him as minutely as we ourselves could, of all our enormities."

Four days afterward, Cowper wrote to Newton, and in an altogether different tone. The fine breeding of the gentleman, and the forbearance of the genuine Christian, are conspicuous in every line. There is no haste in vindicating himself and his fellow-accused from the unjust charge; he

does not reproach their mentor for his readiness to believe in, and to convict his late parishioners of, the worst of the allegations brought against them. The dignified sadness of what even Newton must have accepted as a more than satisfactory defence must have smitten the unjust judge with remorse such as should befall one who, even unwittingly, has offended one of "these little ones."

After congratulating his correspondent on his recent "agreeable jaunt," and safe return to his home and work, and expressing his sincere gratification at Mrs. Newton's recovery after a "terrible fall," Cowper goes on to speak of Newton's "letter to Mrs. Unwin, concerning our conduct, and the offence taken at it in our neighbourhood."

"If any of our serious neighbours have been 'astonished' they have been so without the smallest real occasion. Poor people are never well employed even when they judge one another; but when they undertake to scan the motives and estimate the behaviour of those whom Providence has exalted a little above them, they are utterly out of their province and their depth. They often see us get into Lady Hesketh's carriage, and rather uncharitably suppose that it always carries us to a scene of dissipation—which it never does. . . ."

A dozen lines tell to what places and

upon what errands the offensive chariot-and-pair conveys the two delinquents, and three suffice to dispose of the assertion that the Weston and Gayhurst associations are hurtful to Christian character and influence.

"It were too hazardous an assertion even for our censorious neighbours to make that, because the cause of the Gospel does not appear to have been served at present, therefore it never can be in any future intercourse we may have with them. In the mean time I speak a truth, and, as in the sight of God, when I say that we are neither of us more addicted to gadding than heretofore. We both naturally love seclusion from company, and never go into it without putting a force upon our disposition; at the same time I will confess, and you will easily conceive, that the melancholy incident to such close confinement as we have long endured finds itself a little relieved by such amusements as a society so innocent affords. . . .

"We place all the uneasiness that you have felt for us upon this subject to the cordial friendship of which you have long given us proof. But you may be assured, that, notwithstanding all rumours to the contrary, we are exactly what we were when you saw us last;—I, miserable on account of God's departure from me which I believe to be final; and she seeking His return to me in the path of duty, and by continual prayer."

Lady Hesketh, in nowise daunted by the pelting hail of Olney gossip, and the thunder-storm of Mr. Newton's displeasure,

persevered in her missionary labours until she saw the pair of friends installed in the handsome and convenient residence of Weston Underwood, handsome and commodious in this more luxurious age.

Cowper describes it to one correspondent with forced moderation as "comfortable in itself, and my cousin, who has spared no expense in dressing it up for us, has made it genteel."

To the wife of his lifelong friend, Joseph Hill, he speaks more enthusiastically of the orchard opposite the Lodge, which enabled them "to look into a wood, or rather to be surrounded by one. The village is one of the prettiest I know ; terminated at one end by the church tower, seen through the trees, and at the other, by a very handsome gateway, opening into a fine grove of elms."

Lady Hesketh left them for London the middle of November. In a letter of the 26th Cowper sings the praises of his "mansion" in a strain that must have delighted her generous heart. The parlour was "even elegant," the study

"on the other side of the hall neat, warm, and silent, and a much better study than I deserve if I do not produce in it an incomparable edition of Homer.

"I think every day of those lines of Milton, and congratulate myself upon having obtained, before I am quite superannuated, what he seems not to have hoped for sooner :

> "'And may at length my weary age
> Find out the peaceful hermitage.'

. . . You must always understand, my dear, that when poets talk of cottages, hermitages, and such like things, they mean a house with six sashes in front, two comfortable parlours, a smart staircase, and three bedrooms of convenient dimensions. In short, such a house as this."

The benevolent fairy's good offices did not cease with the change from "the old prison and its precincts" to airy Weston Underwood, with its orchard in front and great gardens in the rear, and its outlook over three parishes to the undulating line of blue hills twenty miles away. Without consulting either of the inmates of the new home, she added twenty pounds a year to their income from her own purse, secured double the amount from a titled relative, and ten pounds from a son of the poet's early friend, Major Cowper.

One day in December, Cowper extended his afternoon walk to Olney and Orchard Side. The house was still tenantless, and

he entered to be chilled and saddened to the heart by the squalid loneliness of parlour and bedrooms.

"Never did I see so forlorn and woeful a spectacle. Deserted of its inhabitants, it seemed as if it could never be dwelt in forever. The coldness of it, the dreariness and the dirt, made me think it no inapt resemblance of a soul that GOD has forsaken."

Always harking back to the haunting horror lurking at the bottom of his soul!

This was written to Newton. Was the dreary imagery a more gracious sign in the stern pastor's sight than the tale of drives between hedge-rows, and Sunday afternoon strolls along the winding Ouse, and social evenings in the fine library of Weston Hall? "The human mind is a great mystery," says another letter to the same spiritual guide. We adopt the words in a different sense, and with an application of which the uncompromising Greatheart never dreamed.

CHAPTER XV

DEATH OF WILLIAM UNWIN—HOMER AND HARD WORK—GATHERING CLOUDS

WILLIAM UNWIN paid a visit of several days to Orchard Side in August, 1786. He was never in better health and spirits, and he was always the life of the quiet house while there. Cowper had no dearer friend, and his mother's heart took continual delight in the rare moral, mental, and spiritual gifts of her only son.

On the day after his departure to his own home, whilst the poet, Mrs. Unwin, and Lady Hesketh were seated quietly together, this last made the remark, "Now, we want Mr. Unwin!" her reason, Cowper observes, for saying so, being that they had spent near half an hour together without laughing—an interval of gravity that seldom occurred when Mr. Unwin was present.

To his fund of natural animal spirits and keen sense of humour, young Unwin joined great sweetness of disposition, and abounding charity of judgment that made his wit stingless and his presence a benediction to all who knew him.

In one of the latest letters Cowper wrote to him, he calls him

"my mahogany box, with a slit in the lid of it, to which I commit my productions of the lyric kind, in perfect confidence that they are safe and will go no further. . . . If you approve my Latin, and your wife and sister my English, this, together with the approbation of your mother, is fame enough for me."

Lady Hesketh eagerly embraced the opportunity of engaging William Unwin as a tutor for her son, a lad about twelve years of age, and was on the point of placing the little Hesketh in the family of his future guardian when the young man fell a victim to a brief, violent attack of putrid fever. The sad event occurred on November 29th, before Cowper and Mrs. Unwin were fairly settled in Weston Underwood.

"There never was a moment in Unwin's life when there seemed to be more urgent need of him than the moment in which he died," wrote Cowper to Lady

Hesketh. And to John Newton ;—"I cannot think of the widow and children that he has left without a heart-ache that I remember not to have felt before. . . . Mrs. Unwin begs me to give her love to you, with thanks for your kind letter. Hers has been so much a life of affliction that, whatever occurs to her in that shape has not, at least, the terrors of novelty to embitter it. She is supported under this, as she has been under a thousand others, with a submission of which I never saw her deprived for a moment."

In these and in other letters of this date, he evidently put deliberate force upon the expression of his afflictions. As we read them the image rises again and again before us of a man fighting away from an encroaching dread, pushing back with both hands a grisly Thing, from the sight of which he averts his face and closes his eyes. He welcomes visitors as earnestly as he had formerly shunned them; Mrs. Throckmorton, who had offered to be "my lady of the ink-bottle this winter," spent many forenoons in his study, copying his MSS. after he had polished and recast them to his mind; Mrs. Unwin put aside her own grief to act as his amanuensis when no other was at hand; he accepted the homage of a young artist who knew most of his published poems by heart, had him to tea,

once and again, and exchanged "spick-and-span new verses" with him for really clever drawings from the artist's pencil. The Throckmortons were Roman Catholics, a circumstance that had no inconsiderable weight in Mr. Newton's disapproval of his late parishioner's altered manner of life.

Cowper tells Lady Hesketh, late in December, that

> "the good Padre shall positively dine here next week, whether he will or not. I do not at all suspect that his kindness to Protestants has anything insidious in it any more than I suspect that he transcribes Homer for me with a view to my conversion. He would find me a tough piece of business, I can tell him; for when I had no religion at all, I had yet a terrible dread of the Pope. How much more now! I should have sent you a longer letter, but was obliged to devote last evening to the melancholy employment of composing a Latin inscription for the tombstone of poor William. . . .
>
> "Homer stands by me, biting his thumbs, and swears that, if I do not leave off directly, he will choke me with bristly Greek that shall stick in my throat forever."

Echoes from those who were praising the rising poet afar off reached his "hermitage." A third edition of his work was in print, and the post brought him daily tributes, printed and epistolary, from ad-

mirers who only lacked encouragement to become devotees:

"A lady unknown addresses the 'best of men'; . . . an unknown gentleman has read my 'inimitable poems' and invites me to his seat in Hampshire; another incognito gives me hopes of a memorial in his garden, and a Welsh attorney sends me his verses to revise, and obligingly asks—

"'Say, shall my little bark attendant sail,
Pursue the triumph and partake the gale?'

I could pity the poor woman who has been weak enough to claim my song. Such pilferings are sure to be detected. I wrote it, I suppose, four years ago. The Rose in question was a Rose given to Lady Austen by Mrs. Unwin, and the incident that suggested the subject occurred in the room in which you slept at the Vicarage, which Lady Austen made her dining-room."

Reference is here made to verses often attributed to Mrs. Barbauld and of slight poetic merit, if, indeed, they possess any:

"The rose had been washed, just washed in a shower,
Which Mary to Anna conveyed;
The plentiful moisture encumbered the flower,
And weighed down its beautiful head."

He wrought diligently upon Homer up to the middle of January, 1787,—the month which he had imagined was fraught with

peculiar dangers for him, ever since the January of 1773, when he succumbed to the Olney lunacy. Upon the 13th he wrote to Mr. Newton an apology for spending so much time upon a translation instead of upon original poetry. He was

"hunted into the business by extreme distress of spirits, and had found a sort of jejune consolation in it.

"Let my friends, therefore, who wish me some little measure of tranquillity in the performance of the most turbulent voyage that ever Christian mariner made, be contented that, having Homer's mountains and forests to windward, I escape, under this shelter, from the force of many a gust that would almost overset me. As to fame, and honour, and glory that may be acquired by poetical feats of any sort, God knows, that if I could lay me down in a grave with hope at my side, or sit with hope at my side in a dungeon all the residue of my days, I would cheerfully wave them all."

The letter closes with an incidental allusion to his "experience of thirteen years of misery," the length of time that had elapsed since he had the Fatal Dream. The anniversary of this visitation was close upon him when he penned a disquisition upon dreams as portents, or means of instruction or admonition, apropos of the case of a Mrs. Carter, cited by Lady Hesketh. After pointing out to his cousin that "God in old

time spoke by dreams," he concludes: "The same need that there ever was for His interference in this way there is still, and ever must be, while man continues blind and fallible, and a creature beset with dangers which he can neither foresee, nor obviate."

The constrained calmness of which I spoke just now is most marked in a note which follows upon the mention of a week of fever and sleeplessness that had obliged him to intermit his work of translation.

"Homer's battles cannot be fought by a man who does not sleep well, and who has not some degree of animation in the day-time.—I walk constantly, that is to say, Mrs. Unwin and I together; for at these times I keep her continually employed, and never suffer her to be absent from me many minutes. She gives me all her time, and all her attention, and forgets there is another object in the world."

She sent for Dr. Grindon, an Olney surgeon, the day on which this letter was written (January 18, 1787), and he left a phial containing two ounces of tincture of valerian, then esteemed a sovereign remedy for nervousness and insomnia.

On or about the dreaded 24th, Cowper hanged himself in the study he had extolled

as "neat, warm, and silent." Mrs. Unwin entered just in time to cut him down. A second attempt at suicide was frustrated by Mr. Bull's providential appearance upon the scene.

After this interposition Cowper saw nobody but Mrs. Unwin for six months. The dark spirit was in full possession of the long-racked mind. The manful fight had ended in utter defeat.

He was apparently well and sane for between two and three months, before he reopened communication with Mr. Newton. In the earlier part of his letter he confides to his friend that he had been for thirteen years under an odd delusion respecting his (Newton's) identity.

"The acquisition of light,—if light it may be called which leaves me as much in the dark as ever on the most interesting subjects—releases me, however, from the disagreeable suspicion that I am addressing myself to you as the friend whom I loved and valued in my better days, when, in fact, you are not that friend, but a stranger. . . . You will tell me, no doubt, that the knowledge I have gained is an earnest of more and more valuable information, and that the dispersion of the clouds, in part, promises, in due time, their complete dispersion. I should be happy to believe it, but the power to do so is at present far from me. Never was

the mind of man benighted to the degree that mine has been. The storms that have assailed me would have overthrown the faith of every man that ever had any, and the very remembrance of them, even after they have long passed by, makes hope impossible.

"Mrs. Unwin, whose poor bark is still held together, 'though shattered by being tossed and agitated so long at the side of mine, does not forget yours and Mrs. Newton's kindness on this last occasion. Mrs. Newton's offer to come to her assistance, and your readiness to have rendered us the same service, could you have hoped for any salutary effect of your presence, neither Mrs. Unwin nor myself undervalue, nor shall presently forget. But you judged right when you supposed that even your company would have been no relief to me : the company of my father or my brother, could they have returned from the dead to visit me, would have been none to me. . . .

"This last tempest has left my nerves in a worse condition than it found them ; my head especially, 'though better informed, is more infirm than ever."

A glimpse of the remedial measures resorted to a century ago for the cure of a mind diseased, and the elimination of a rooted imaginary sorrow, is afforded in another letter to Lady Hesketh:

"Those jarrings that made my head feel like a broken egg-shell, and those twirls that I spoke of have been removed by an infusion of the bark which I have of late constantly applied to. I was blooded, indeed, but to no purpose, for the whole complaint was owing to relax-

ation. But the apothecary recommended phlebotomy in order to ascertain that matter, wisely suggesting that if I found no relief from bleeding it would be a sufficient proof that weakness must necessarily be the cause." (!)

CHAPTER XVI

SIX PEACEFUL, BUSY YEARS—MRS. UNWIN'S ILLNESS—SAMUEL TEEDON—VISIT TO EARTHAM

COWPER'S sudden, and apparently complete, recovery from what he used to speak of, in connection with "the dreadful seventy-three," as "the more dreadful eighty-six," was succeeded by six years of almost perfect mental health and what approximated tranquillity.

He was no longer a shy recluse. The last visitor whom he received before his illness was Samuel Rose, a young Englishman and a warm admirer of his poems, and to him was addressed the first letter written after he emerged from the darkness. "A valuable young man, who, attracted by the effluvia of my genius, found me out in my retirement last January twelvemonth," he writes playfully to Lady Hesketh in 1788.

"I have not permitted him to be idle, but have made him transcribe for me the twelfth book of the *Iliad*."

The kindness of the Throckmortons beguiled him into visiting them frequently and into inviting them to frequent the Lodge in their turn.

It was of this halcyon period that it was written: "The great charm of the social gatherings at Weston Hall was the table-talk, to which, of course, Cowper was the chief contributor."

Another authority confirms what seems to us to need confirmation when we carry in mind our preconceived picture of the reserved, diffident student, avoiding the face of his fellow-man and selecting his pew in the gallery of the Olney church, where he could neither see the preacher, nor be seen by him:

"It was not so much what Cowper said, as the way he said it—his manner of relating an ordinary incident—which charmed his auditory, or convulsed them with merriment. Moreover, they knew that something delightful was coming before it came. His eyes would suddenly kindle and all his face become lighted up with the fun of the story before he opened his mouth to speak. At last he began to relate some ludicrous incident, which 'though you had yourself witnessed it, you had failed to

recognise as mirthful. A bull had frightened him, and caused him to clear a hedge with undue precipitation. His 'shorts' became seriously lacerated, and the consternation with which their modest occupant had effected his retreat home—holding his garment together in order that his calamity might escape detection—was made extravagantly diverting."

He wrote a mock-heroic poem upon this same bull, rhyming letters and riddles to London friends, read and answered epistles from unknown readers of his popular books, received presents from, and welcomed to the hermitage, new acquaintances like Mrs. King, a clergyman's wife, who had been a friend of John Cowper, and opened a correspondence with his brother, after reading *The Task, etc.*

We borrow from Samuel Rose's letter to his sister a pleasing sketch of the daily living at Weston Underwood from 1787 to 1789:

"Here I found Lady Hesketh, a very agreeable, good-tempered woman, polite without ceremony, and sufficiently well-bred to make others happy in her company. I here feel no restraint, and none is wished to be inspired. We rise at whatever hour we choose; breakfast at half-after nine, take about an hour to satisfy the sentiment, not the appetite—for we talk,—good heaven! *how* we

talk ! and enjoy ourselves most wonderfully. Then we separate, and dispose of ourselves as our different inclinations point. Mr. Cowper to Homer, Mr. Rose to transcribing what is already translated, Lady Hesketh to work and to books alternately, and Mrs. Unwin who, in everything but her face is a kind angel sent from heaven to guard the health of our poet—is busy in domestic concerns. At one, our labours finished, the poet and I walk for two hours. I, then, drink most plentiful draughts of instruction which flow from his lips, instruction so sweet, and goodness so exquisite that one loves it for its flavour. At three we return and dress, and the succeeding hour brings dinner upon the table, and collects again the smiling countenances of the family to partake of the neat and elegant meal. Conversation continues until tea-time, when an entertaining volume engrosses our thoughts until the last meal is announced. Conversation again, and to rest before twelve, to enable us to rise again to the same round of innocent pleasure."

The *Iliad* was finished September 23, 1788. On September 24, Cowper began the translation of the *Odyssey*. The continued strain had begun to be felt by him, eager though he seemed to plunge into the new enterprise.

He confesses, October 30: "Let me once get well out of these long stories, and if I ever meddle with such matters more, call me, as Fluellen says,—'a fool and an ass, and a prating coxcomb.'"

December 20, found the *Iliad* receiving

its last polish, the *Odyssey* "advanced in a rough state to the ninth book."

"My friends are some of them in haste to see the work printed, and my answer to them is—'I do nothing else, and this I do, day and night. It must in time be finished."

Two Januaries had passed without calamity. As if a malicious fate were bent upon keeping alive superstitious dreads of the month and especially of the neighbourhood of the awful twenty-fourth day, Mrs. Unwin narrowly escaped death by fire on the twenty-first of January, 1788. Her night-clothes took fire from the snuff of a candle she thought she had extinguished, and but for her presence of mind in gathering up her blazing skirts and plunging them into water, she must have been burned to death before help could reach her.

Upon January 29, 1789, Cowper writes to Mrs. King of another and more serious mishap:

"I have more items than one by which to remember the late frost. It has cost me the bitterest uneasiness. Mrs. Unwin got a fall on the gravel-walk covered with ice, which has confined her to an upper chamber ever since. She neither broke, nor dislocated any bones, but received such a contusion below the hip as crippled her

completely. She now begins to recover after having been as helpless as a child for a whole fortnight, but so slowly at present that her amendment is, even now, almost imperceptible."

Mr. Wright gives an extract pertinent to this accident from one of the many unpublished Cowper letters he has rescued from oblivion. The date is January 19, the day of Mrs. Unwin's fall:

"I have been so many years accustomed either to feel trouble or to expect it, that habit has endued me with that sort of fortitude which I remember my old schoolmaster, Dr. Nicholl, used to call the passive valour of an ass."

This especial trouble was the beginning of the end for her whose sublimity of self-devotion to her hapless charge strikes us dumb with wondering reverence. In many of the letters written by Cowper that year he alludes to her slow recovery of health and activity.

He writes to Newton, December 1, 1789, that

"Mrs. Unwin's case is, at present, my only subject of uneasiness that is not immediately personal, and properly my own. She has almost constant headaches; almost a constant pain in her side, which nobody under-

stands, and her lameness, within the last year, is very little amended."

During the next January (1790) he says, —also to Mr. Newton :

"Twice has that month returned upon me, accompanied by such horrors as I have no reason to suppose ever made part of the experience of any other man. I accordingly look forward to it with a dread not to be imagined."

Again the dreaded season passed without notable casualty, and the February anniversary of the Fatal Dream. Instead of sorrow, the latter month brought him the gift of his mother's picture, to which we owe the most exquisite lyric to which his pen ever gave birth, and one of the most beautiful and touching in any language.

"I had rather possess it than the richest jewel in the British crown," he breaks forth to Lady Hesketh in describing his treasure. "I remember her, young as I was when she died, well enough to know that it is a very exact resemblance of her, and as such to me it is invaluable."

To his cousin and early playfellow, the donor, he speaks yet more passionately :

"I received it with a trepidation of nerves and spirits somewhat akin to what I should have felt had the dear original presented herself to my embraces. I kissed it and hung it where it is the last object that I see at night, and, of course, the first on which I open my eyes in the morning."

Of the poem, "written not without tears," he says he had more pleasure in writing it than any other that he had ever produced, one excepted.

"That one was addressed to a lady whom I expect in a few minutes to come down to breakfast, and who has supplied to me the place of my own mother—my own invaluable mother! these six-and-twenty years. Some sons may be said to have had many fathers, but a plurality of mothers is not common."

The sonnet here referred to was that beginning—

"Mary! I want a lyre with other strings,
Such aid from heaven as some have feigned they drew,
An eloquence scarce given to mortals, new
And undebased by praise of meaner things."

Mrs. Unwin had so far recovered her spirits, if not her strength, as to be able to communicate an important, and evidently to her an exciting, bit of literary news to Cowper's cousin, Mrs. Balls, October 25, 1791.

The translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, although little known and less cared for by the readers and critics of our generation, were most favourably received by the public of the seventeen-nineties, and cleared a thousand pounds for the author, besides earning him a gratifying access of fame. Reactionary depression was sure to follow his long-sustained labour and the excitement of successful publication. What to turn his hand to next was a vexed question. He needed rest and relaxation, yet was keenly alive to the dangers of introspective indolence.

"Many different plans and projects are recommended to me," he says. "Some call aloud for original verse, others for more translation, and others for other things. Providence, I hope, will direct me in my choice, for other guide I have none, nor wish for another."

What Mrs. Unwin hailed as a plain indication of the Divine will shortly presented itself:

"Ever since the close of his translation," she wrote to Mrs. Balls, "I have had many anxious thoughts how he would spend the advancing winter. Had he followed either of the three professions in his earlier days, he might have been not only laying the foundation, but also raising the fabric of a distinguished character, and

have spent the remaining portion of his life in endeavouring to maintain it. But the life of a mere gentleman very few, or any, are equal to support with credit to themselves, or comfort to their friends. But a gracious Providence has dissipated my fears on that head. After a warm and strong solicitation he has been prevailed upon to stand forth as an editor of the most splendid and magnificent edition of Milton that was ever offered to the public. His engagement is to translate all the Latin and Italian poems, to select the most approved notes of his predecessors in that line, and add elucidations and annotations on the text as he sees proper. Fuseli is to furnish paintings for the thirty copper-plates, and Johnson, the bookseller, has taken upon himself to provide the first artists for engraving. This work will take your cousin, upon his own computation, about two years."

A singular complication of what the toiler named "the Miltonic Trap" was the influence of Samuel Teedon, an Olney schoolmaster, upon Cowper's decision. Without being illiterate, Teedon was narrow of intellect, provincial, and a fanatic. While his neighbour in Olney, Cowper had amused himself with the pedagogue's fantasies and overweening self-conceit. He enjoyed "stuffing" him upon one of his many visits, at another "felt the sweat gush out upon his forehead" at Teedon's tactless flattery of himself (Cowper). By

degrees, and by ways we cannot comprehend, both Mrs. Unwin and Cowper began to have confidence in Teedon's oracles—viz., his intuitions, especial answers to prayer, and even direct revelations from Heaven in voices and visions.

"No suspicion of knavery attaches to him, for he was a simple-hearted creature," says Southey. "As they"—Mrs. Unwin and the poet—"would have him to be a sort of high priest *incog.* such he fancied himself to be, and consulted his internal Urim and Thummim with happy and untroubled confidence."

We cannot escape the suspicion that Mrs. Unwin's excellent sense and clear judgment were yielding to the terrible pressure laid upon her through six-and-twenty years, now that her firm health was no longer the ally of her brain and nerves,—when we read that "the earliest notice of these pitiable consultations relates to the proposed edition of Milton." It runs thus:

"Mrs. Unwin thanks Mr. Teedon for his letters, and is glad to find the Lord gives him so great encouragement to proceed by shining on his addresses and quickening him by His word. Mrs. Unwin acknowledges the Lord's goodness, which is mixed with the many and various trials He sees fit to visit his servants with."

A week later:

"Mrs. Unwin has the satisfaction of informing Mr. Teedon that Mr. Cowper is tranquil this morning, and that, with this which Mr. Teedon receives, a letter by the post, decisive of his undertaking the important business, will go by the same messenger. . . . Mr. Cowper and Mrs. Unwin are agreed that it was hardly possible to find out a reference to the great point in Mr. Teedon's first letter. His second favour elucidated the whole, and removed all doubts. They hope Mr. Teedon will continue to help them with his prayers on this occasion."

Mr. Wright supplies the key to these notes:

"When the question arose whether or not he should undertake the editorship of Milton, it was Teedon that Cowper consulted, and Teedon, after much prayer, obtained from Heaven that it was certainly expedient that the poet should engage in the work. Cowper's doubts now vanished."

The important undertaking was well under way in November, 1791. One day in December, as Mrs. Unwin sat by the fireside, and Cowper toiled at his desk in the cozy study at Weston Underwood, she called out faintly, "Oh, Mr. Cowper! don't let me fall!"

He sprang to her side in time to catch her as she fell forward.

"For some moments," he relates to Mrs. King (January 26, 1792), "her knees and ankles were so entirely disabled that she had no use of them, and it was with

the exertion of all my strength that I replaced her in her seat. Many days she kept her bed, and for some weeks her chamber, but at length, has joined me in my study. Her recovery has been extremely slow, and she is still feeble, but, I thank God, not so feeble but that I hope for her perfect restoration in the spring."

In March the same correspondent is told: "Mrs. Unwin, I thank God, is better, but still wants much of complete restoration. We have reached a time of life when heavy blows, if not fatal, are at least long felt."

In May, a pleasure Cowper had long anticipated with eagerness was granted to him,—a visit from William Hayley, the poet, translator, and essayist, whose *Life of William Cowper* testifies to the justice of his appreciation of his friend, the richness and delicacy of his imagination, and the sterling qualities of a friendship of which Cowper had written to him before their meeting: "God grant that this friendship of ours may be a comfort to us all the rest of our days, in a world where true friendships are rare, and especially where, suddenly formed, they are apt soon to terminate."

During Hayley's stay at Weston Lodge,

Mrs. Unwin had a paralytic stroke, and remained alarmingly ill for several hours. Relieved partially and beyond the expectations of her friends, she yet remained a confirmed invalid.

July 9, 1792, saw an appeal for time sent to Johnston, the publisher:

"It is not possible for me to do anything that demands study and attention in the present state of our family. I am the electrician; I am the escort into the garden; I am wanted, in short, on a hundred little occasions that occur every day in Mrs. Unwin's present state of infirmity. . . . The time fixed in your proposals for publication meanwhile steals on, and I have lately felt my engagement for Milton bear upon my spirits with a pressure which, added to the pressure of some other private concerns, is almost more than they are equal to."

In August, moved rather by the hope that the change might benefit Mrs. Unwin than by the hope of any enjoyment he might himself draw from the expedition, Cowper accepted Hayley's urgent invitation to his beautiful country home, called by Gibbon "the little Paradise of Eartham."

The journey was made by carriage and occupied nearly three days; the scenery of Sussex through which they drove was superb to the eyes of the two Lowlanders; they were received with affectionate hospi-

tality in what Cowper says was "the most elegant mansion he ever inhabited," and were made "as happy as it was in the power of terrestrial good to make us."

The jarring tone in an otherwise charming tale is a paragraph in a letter to Samuel Teedon, the first written after their arrival:

> "I had one glimpse—at least, I was willing to hope it was a glimpse—of heavenly light by the way, an answer, I suppose, to many fervent prayers of yours. Continue to pray for us, and when anything occurs worth communicating, let us know. . . .
>
> "I am yours with many thanks for all your spiritual aids."

Teedon wrote one hundred and twenty-six letters to Cowper, who, in the schoolmaster's lately discovered Diary, is styled "the squire," and sixty to "Madam"—his title for Mrs. Unwin—in the interval dividing August, 1791, from February, 1794. The parasite who developed into the teacher paid the grateful twain *ninety-two* visits in the same time. These are likewise recorded in his diary, the queer production of a queerer man, but one who was, in his own opinion as in that of his infinitely better-bred and -educated disciples, the peculiar favourite of Heaven.

CHAPTER XVII

HOMER—"MY MARY!"—FAMILIAR DEMON—MRS. UNWIN'S DEATH—THE END

THE delights of the Eartham visit were succeeded after the return to Weston by a brief season of depression in Mrs. Unwin's physical state, and by a menace of what Cowper notes, as "my old disorder—nervous fever."

"At present" (October 18, the date of a letter to John Newton)

"I am tolerably free from it,—a blessing for which I believe myself partly indebted to the use of James's powders taken in small quantities, and partly to a small quantity of laudanum taken every night, but chiefly to a manifestation of God's presence vouchsafed to me a few days since, transient, indeed, and dimly seen, through a mist of many fears and troubles, but sufficient to convince me, at least while the enemy's power is a little restrained, that He has not cast me off forever."

The "manifestation" is more minutely

described in a letter to the invariable Teedon:

"On Sunday, while I walked with Mrs. Unwin and my cousin in the orchard, it pleased GOD to enable me once more to approach Him in prayer, and I prayed silently for everything that lay nearest my heart with a considerable degree of liberty."

A few days thereafter he declares his purpose "to continue such prayer as I can make."

To Hayley he wrote at the same time: "I am a pitiful beast, and in the texture of my mind and natural temper, have three threads of despondency to one of hope."

While these subterranean fires smouldered, he played the man in a gallant effort to go on with the Miltonic engagement, and allowed himself no relief from the drudgery other than he found in "playing push-pin with Homer,"—*i.e.*, revising and annotating a second edition of his translation of the *Iliad*. His eyes began to trouble him early in 1793, yet we find him, in November of that year, rising before day, "while the owls are still hooting, to pursue my accustomed labours in the mine of Homer."

The year had been busy, but uneventful save for the slow, ceaseless burning of the hidden fires, and the record of their variations in the letters to the Olney seer. The poet's list of friends and worshippers had grown steadily, and his gracious courtesy to one and all showed the thoroughbred, as the tenderness of his inimitable letters, and the play of humour which he knew would please his correspondents, illustrated his kindness of heart.

In one of the last letters he ever wrote to Teedon, he makes griefful note of the old "nervous fever," a malady his friends knew well enough by this time to dread above all other ailments:

"In this state of mind, how can I write? It is in vain to attempt it. I have neither spirits for it, as I have often said, nor leisure. Yet vain as I know the attempt must prove, I purpose in a few days to renew it.

"Mrs. Unwin is as well as when I wrote last, but, like myself, dejected. Dejected both on my account and on her own. Unable to amuse herself with work or reading, she looks forward to a new day with despondence, weary of it before it begins, and longing for the return of night."

When he renewed his literary work it was to tell the same story more at length and in language that has wrung thousands

of hearts with sympathetic sorrow. The lines *To Mary* stand next to the incomparable tribute to his mother, in pathos, beauty, and heart-break:

The twentieth year is well-nigh past,
Since first our sky was overcast,
Ah, would that this might be the last!
My Mary!

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow—
'T was my distress that brought thee low,
My Mary!

Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake, restless heretofore,
Now rest disused and shine no more,
My Mary!

For, though thou gladly wouldst fulfil
The same kind office for me still,
Thy sight now seconds not thy will,
My Mary!

And still to love, 'though prest with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill,
With me is to be lovely still,
My Mary!

But ah! by constant heed I know
How oft the sadness that I show
Transforms thy smiles to looks of woe,
My Mary!

And should my future lot be cast
With much resemblance to the Past—
Thy worn-out heart will break at last,
My Mary !

Alarmed by the reports of the melancholy changes in the home she had set up at Weston Underwood under such auspicious circumstances, Lady Hesketh paid a visit to her cousin, choosing, at his suggestion, the beginning of winter, and planning to remain over the fateful month of January.

"I found," she writes, "this dear soul the absolute nurse of this poor lady who cannot move out of her chair without help, nor walk across the room unless supported by two people. Added to this, her voice is almost wholly unintelligible, and as their house was repairing all the summer, he was reduced, poor soul ! for many months to have no conversation but hers."

The society of his good genius wrought the wonted spell upon Cowper's spirits for a little while. The winter evening readings were resumed, and *Jonathan Wild*, with other cheerful books forwarded by Samuel Rose, were enjoyed and discussed.

The familiar demon descended upon his prey with sullen power in January. For six dreary days the possessed man sat "still

and silent as death," in his study, refusing all nourishment other than a morsel of bread dipped in wine and forced upon him three times a day by his attendants. This self-imposed "penance for his sins" was interrupted by his physician's kindly stratagem. Mrs. Unwin was, with some difficulty, so far aroused as to become his accomplice. It was "a fine morning," she quavered forth, and she "thought it would do her good to walk."

"Cowper immediately arose, took her by the arm,—and the spell which had fixed him to his chair was broken. This appears to be the last instance in which her influence over him was exerted for good." Hayley, summoned by Lady Hesketh, joined his efforts to hers to induce the sufferers to try the effect of a removal from Weston to Norfolk — to the seashore — to any place that promised change of thought and healthful air for the worn-out bodies.

"He now does nothing but walk incessantly backwards and forwards either in his study or his bed-chamber," Lady Hesketh wrote to a confidential correspondent, May 5, 1795. "Can I find room to tell you Mrs. Unwin had another attack the seventeenth of last month? It affected her face and voice only. She is a dreadful

spectacle ; yet within two days she has made our wretched cousin drag her 'round the garden."

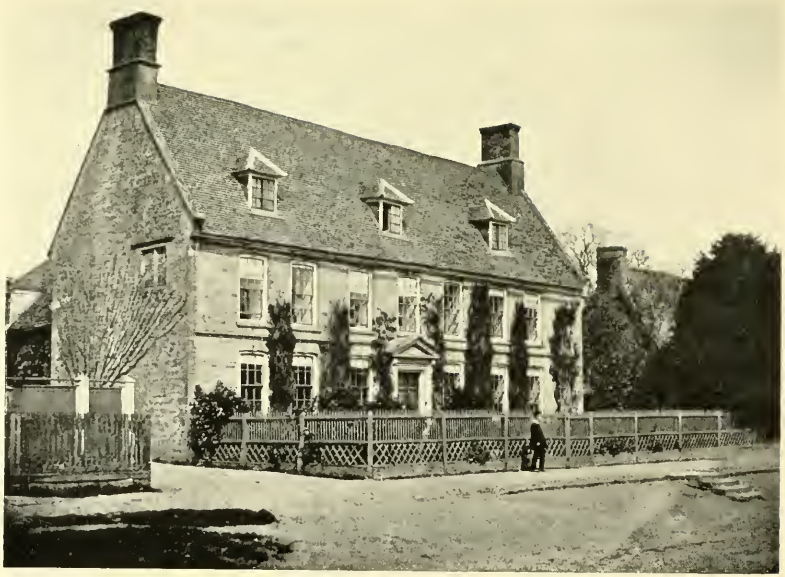
Mr. John Johnson, Cowper's kinsman, better known through the poet's letters as "Johnny of Norfolk," came to Hayley's and Lady Hesketh's help, and the difficult task was effected of removing the partially sane pair from the asylum to which they clung. They were assured confidently that they should return within a few weeks, perhaps within a few days. But Cowper pencilled, July 22, upon the white wooden shutter of his bedroom, what showed that he, at least, was not deceived on this head.

"Farewell, dear scenes forever closed to me ;
Oh! for what sorrows must I now exchange ye ! "

The day of departure was probably delayed for some reason, for below *July 22* is set down in the same minute characters, —*28, 1795*.

Lady Hesketh had remained, unshrinkingly, at her post until now.

The visitor to Weston Lodge (otherwise Weston Underwood) may still see the clumsy couplet upon the inner blind of the window overlooking the gardens conse-



WESTON LODGE NEAR OLNEY; COWPER'S HOME FOR NINE YEARS

crated by the poet's work and walks during nearly ten years. At the top of the second garden is a summer-house erected upon the site of that constructed by "Sam," who, "laying his own noddle and the carpenter's noddle together, built a thing fit for Stow's Gardens.

> Beware of buildings ! I intended
> Rough logs and thatch, and thus it ended."

Below the lame couplet upon the blind, between which and our eyes a slow mist gathers, as we look from the peaceful bowers and plantations back to the faint pencillings, other lines were inscribed by the same hand at the same time. A stupid housemaid scrubbed them away, a hundred years ago.

> " Me miserable ! how could I escape
> Infinite wrath and infinite despair ?
> Whom Death, Earth, Heaven and Hell consigned to ruin,
> Whose friend was God, but God swore not to aid me."

"Sam," the faithful henchman, copied them from the shutter after his master had gone.

Among the halting-places made by Mr.

Johnson in his pious pilgrimage with his helpless patients was the house of Mrs. Bodham, the donor of "My Mother's Picture." Everywhere the travellers were welcomed affectionately, and when they reached Mundesley on the Norfolk coast, Cowper was so nearly restored to reason as to begin "the last series of his letters to Lady Hesketh." For a while he constrains himself to write of what he sees, and to avoid talk of what he feels. Through this surface composure there breaks up, from time to time, a hot jet of bitter waters from the tormented depths:

"I have been tossed like a ball into a far country from which there is no rebound for me."

"With Mrs. Unwin's respects, I remain the forlorn and miserable being I was when I wrote last."

"Oh wretch! to whom death and life are alike impossible!"

"All my themes of misery may be summed in one word;—He who made me regrets that ever He did. Many years have passed since I learned this terrible truth from Himself."

Mr. and Mrs. Powley came from their Yorkshire parsonage to visit Mrs. Unwin while she was in Mundesley, and Cowper listened without objection to the chapter

from the Bible read by Mr. Powley to his mother-in-law every morning before she left her bed. Cowper's physical condition was undoubtedly improved by the sea air and change of scene, and Hayley's hopes arose high.

"God grant," he says, "that he may soon smile upon us all, like the sun new risen. I have a strong persuasion on that subject, and feel convinced myself (I know not how) that the good old lady's flight to heaven will prove the precursor of his perfect mental recovery."

Late in October, 1796, the party left the seashore for Mr. Johnson's home in East Durham, a Norfolk market town. Mrs. Unwin was confined to her bed from the first of December, and on the morning of the seventeenth of that month was known by all to be dying. Nothing had been said to Cowper of her condition, but his first question of the servant who opened his blinds on that morning was—"Is there life above-stairs?"

At the usual hour for his morning visit, he went to the dying woman's room, and remained until noon. He had been below-stairs but half an hour when the news was

brought to Mr. Johnson, who was reading Fanny Burney's *Camilla* aloud to him, that Mrs. Unwin was dead.

Cowper received the news "not without emotion," but astonished his kinsman by asking him presently to "go on reading." "This was no sane composure," Southey informs us unnecessarily. Soon the survivor was seized with a horror of his friend's premature burial.

"She is not actually dead. She will come to life again in the grave and undergo the agonies of suffocation, and on my account. I am the occasion of all that she, or any other creature upon earth, ever did, or could, suffer."

When, in compliance with his request, his kinsman led him to the death-room, he stood gazing upon the marble face for some moments, then "flung himself to the other side of the room with a passionate expression of feeling."

Her name never passed his lips again.

In 1797, the cloud of listless despondency lifted so far from Cowper's spirit that he yielded to an artful temptation placed in his way by Johnson in the shape of sundry commentaries upon Homer left upon Cow-

per's table, all open at the place where his translation had stopped, a year before.

He settled down to work upon the revision of his own manuscript, and wrought patiently at it until March, 1799. On the 20th of March he wrote his last and saddest poem—*The Castaway:*

Obscurest night involved the sky ;
Th' Atlantic billows roar'd,
When such a destin'd wretch as I,
Wash'd headlong from on board,
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home forever left.

No braver chief could Albion boast,
Than he with whom he went,
Nor ever ship left Albion's coast,
With warmer wishes sent.
He loved them both, but both in vain,
Nor him beheld, nor her again.

Not long beneath the 'whelming brine,
Expert to swim, he lay ;
Nor soon he felt his strength decline,
Or courage die away ;
But waged with death a lasting strife,
Supported by despair of life.

He shouted : nor his friends had failed
To check the vessel's course,
But so the furious blast prevail'd,
That, pitiless perforce,
They left their outcast mate behind,
And scudded still before the wind.

Some succour yet they could afford,
And such as storms allow,
The cask, the coop, the floated cord,
Delay'd not to bestow ;
But he (they knew) nor ship, nor shore,
Whate'er they gave, should visit more.

Nor, cruel as it seem'd, could he
Their haste himself condemn,
Aware that flight in such a sea
Alone could rescue them ;
Yet bitter felt it still to die
Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives, who lives an hour
In ocean, self-upheld :
And so long he, with unspent power,
His destiny repell'd ;
And ever, as the minutes flew,
Entreated help, or cried—"Adieu !"

At length, his transient respite past,
His comrades, who before
Had heard his voice in every blast,
Could catch the sound no more.
For then, by toil subdued, he drank
The stifling wave and then he sank.

No poet wept him ; but the page
Of narrative sincere,
That tells his name, his worth, his age,
Is wet with Anson's tear.
And tears by bards or heroes shed
Alike immortalise the dead.

I therefore purpose not, or dream,
  Descanting on his fate,
To give the melancholy theme
  A more enduring date :
But misery still delights to trace
Its semblance in another's case.

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
  No light propitious shone,
When, snatched from all effectual aid,
  We perish'd—each alone :
But I, beneath a rougher sea,
And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

The end of the long, inscrutable agony was drawing on, slowly but surely. No man ever had more devoted friends, and in his last months he found in his attendant, Miss Perowne, "one of those excellent beings whom Nature seems to have formed expressly for the purpose of alleviating the sufferings of the afflicted." She could induce him to take medicine he would receive from no one else, and Mr. Johnson seconded her "with an equal portion of unvaried tenderness and unshaken fidelity."

January, 1800, passed without sensible aggravation of his gravest symptoms, and Hayley's rekindling hopes were fanned by the receipt (February 1) of a revised copy of certain lines of the *Iliad* as translated

by Cowper, "written in a firm but delicate hand," in fulfilment of Hayley's desire that one word should be altered.

Cowper never took pen in hand again. Dropsy set in early in February. Before the end of March, he kept his room all day, and, until after breakfast, his bed.

"How do you feel?" asked the physician one day.

"*Feel!*" with a look of untranslatable meaning. "*I feel unutterable despair.*"

Lady Hesketh was too infirm in health to come to him. Hayley was in close attendance upon his own dying son. Samuel Rose hastened to Cowper's bedside, but his presence brought no comfort.

The 19th of April dawned upon eyes that Mr. Johnson was sure would never see the sun rise again. Breaking the crust of reserve, he spoke to his kinsman of the certainly approaching change, and urged upon him the truth that "in the world to which he was hastening, a merciful Redeemer had prepared unspeakable happiness for all His children, . . . and therefore for him."

Cowper heard the exhortation half through, then burst into a vehement en-

treaty that his kinsman would not seek to delude him with false hopes to which he could not listen. For five days longer he lay silent—never sullen—but calm in the apathy of despair. If he suffered physically, he made no moan, and the blinded spirit had ceased to grope in the rayless night enveloping it.

Once, during the night preceding his dissolution, he spoke. Miss Perowne, finding his pulse low and his feet and hands cold, would have had him swallow a cordial. He put it aside, resolutely :

"What can it signify ?"

His tongue never framed another sentence. He passed away in sleep, without sound or struggle, on the afternoon of April 25, in the sixty-ninth year of his age.

Mr. Johnson has left on record a sentence that falls upon our hearts like the calm of a summer sunset after a day of hurrying clouds, sobbing gusts, and wild rains:

"From that moment, 'till the coffin was closed, the expression into which his countenance had settled was that of calmness and composure, *mingled, as it were, with holy surprise.*"

Mr. Wright sets, in close connection with

this blessed clause, the fact that Cowper believed in the return of disembodied spirits to the earth.

"In this sense, I suppose," he had said to Newton, "there is a heaven upon earth at all times, and that the disembodied spirit may find a peculiar joy arising from the contemplation of those places it was formerly conversant with, and, so far at least, be reconciled to a world it was once so weary of, as to use it in the delightful way of thankful recollection."

May we not believe, and thank God for the fancy, that the sweet mother who had so long had all her other children with her in Heaven was graciously permitted to bear to this "afflicted soul, tossed with tempest, and not comforted," the tidings that he was a partaker in the "unspeakable happiness" he had despaired of attaining? Did the welcome to the joy of the Lord he had never ceased to love while he believed himself shut out forever from His presence, awaken the "holy surprise" which brought back youth and comeliness to the face marred by the awful and mysterious sorrow, as fearsome as it is incomprehensible to us?

Lady Hesketh, faithful unto death, and beyond it, erected above her cousin the

monument in Dereham Church. Two anonymous friends placed there a tablet to the memory of Mrs. Unwin, who sleeps at his side.

Hayley wrote the inscription upon each :

IN MEMORY OF
WILLIAM COWPER, ESQ.
BORN IN HERTFORDSHIRE, 1731.
BURIED IN THIS CHURCH, 1800.

Ye, who with warmth the public triumph feel
Of talents dignified by sacred zeal,
Here, to devotion's bard devoutly just,
Pay your fond tribute due to Cowper's dust.
England, exulting in his spotless fame,
Ranks with her dearest sons his favourite name.
Sense, fancy, wit, suffice not all to raise
So clear a title to affection's praise:
His highest honours to the heart belong,
His virtues form'd the magic of his song.

IN MEMORY OF
MARY,
WIDOW OF THE REV. MORLEY UNWIN,
AND MOTHER OF
THE REV. WILLIAM CAWTHORNE UNWIN.
BORN AT ELY, 1724.
BURIED IN THIS CHURCH, 1796.

Trusting in God, with all her heart and mind,
This woman proved magnanimously kind ;
Endured affliction's desolating hail,
And watched a poet through misfortune's vale.
Her spotless dust angelic guards defend,
It is the dust of Unwin, Cowper's friend.
That single title in itself is fame,
For all who read his verse revere her name.

CHAPTER XVIII

COWPER'S WRITINGS

AS literary fame is made and maintained in our age of rush and sensational novelties, it is hard to comprehend the place occupied in the world of letters, a century ago, by the shy, morbid Cowper. His personality had nothing to do with his literary career. In fact, the two were so utterly dissociated that the reader of his Life cannot link the portrait therein depicted with virile lines which have set him among the masters of English verse ; and they are disposed to receive doubtfully the assertion that he was the popular poet of his generation.

The *Olney Hymns* and the domestic scenes—without parallel in grace, tenderness, and feeling—given to us in *The Task* made him welcome and belovèd in every

Christian home; the perfect structure of his sentences, the aptness of his imagery, the simplicity and force of his diction, have made him a classic, and a model to students who would also be scholars.

His writings in prose and in poetry will remain "wells of English undefiled" while authors acknowledge the duty they owe to our noble vernacular. As a humble learner in this school, I shall consider myself amply repaid for the labour bestowed upon the preparation of this book, if I can divert the attention of one admirer of turgid and erotic modern verse to the purer pleasures to be drawn from perusal of the works of one whose genius was never perverted to base uses, with whom Art was never divorced from Conscience.

To this end I append a partial list of publications that appeared in Cowper's lifetime. His posthumous works added little to his reputation, and are interesting merely as side-lights upon his individual history.

Olney Hymns (1779). These have been sung around the world and translated into fifty foreign languages and dialects.

Anti-Thelyphthora (1781). A satirical reply to Martin Madan's *Thelyphthora*. It

was issued anonymously, and never claimed openly by Cowper. He is said to have spoken of it as "a mistake, if not a folly."

Poems, by William Cowper, Esq., of the Middle Temple (1782).

Tale of Three Pet Hares, Puss, Tiney and Bess. This first appeared in the June number of *Gentleman's Magazine* (1785).

The Task—A Poem in Six Books; Tirocinium, and *John Gilpin,* in one volume (1785).

Translations from Homer (1791).

Poems: containing *Lines to My Mother's Picture, Dog and Water Lily,* and other short poems of less note (1798).

Essays written (1756) for *The Connoisseur,* and other periodicals, were exhumed after the author became famous, as were his early translations of *Horace, The Odyssey,* etc.

A thin volume of *Early Productions* was issued in 1825, a quarter-century after his death. The circumstances attending the publication are given in full in former chapters of this Biography.

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